

sugar magnolia by redjadequeen

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Summary:

1987. Patricia Des Barres is a young aspiring journalist and underground metal zine writer in Los Angeles. Headstrong daughter of a 60's groupie, she's trying to carve a path independent from her mother's wild, reckless ways. Turns out the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Enter Billy Hargrove, talented drummer for an up and coming L.A hard rock band. Chick-magnet, rough around the edges and cocky to boot. The epitome of what Patricia is trying to avoid. Too bad he has his sights set on her and they're both insanely stubborn.

1. those eyes, that mouth

Author's Note:

This is the least Stranger Things story ever, featuring an older, more feral Billy. Set in the concrete jungle of The Sunset Strip but also the ocean shores of Santa Monica. Expect explicit sex, drugs, and rock n roll. As well as drug addiction and major drama.

This veers off the ST timeline too as Billy is 26 and has never lived in Hawkins.

To be clear, this is more of my original character's story than it is Billy's, though he is there every step of the way.

Hope you enjoy!

[Here's a link to the spotify playlist for this fic.](#)

July 12, 1987. Los Angeles, California

Patricia wakes up to touch and sticky-warm heat, pressure of an arm hanging heavy over her waist. A steady breath at her nape and a small groan in her ear. The gravelly sound reminds her of where she is. Who she's lying next to. How she got here.

Last night isn't a blur, but it's definitely a mistake.

A couple of days after a breakup and she's already naked in the arms of someone else. She told herself she wouldn't do this. That she'd let herself actually take a breath before bed hopping. Some things never change.

Eyelids drift open, slowly taking in the small studio apartment she ended up in this time around. Tangerine glow streaming in through blinds makes her blink, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. There's a bowl of pink-white seashells next to a pack of Marlboro Reds on the

nightstand. The lazy hum of a fan running that does nothing but blow humid air around. Lingering scent of sandalwood incense and cologne and cigarette smoke.

Patricia looks behind her and sees tangled waves of sandy blonde hair, closed eyes with lashes long enough to envy. Square jaw and the flex of muscle under sun-kissed skin.

Well, at least she still has good taste.

She needs to get out of here. Not smart of her to have spent the night when she has to work on the other side of the city. She attempts to sneak out from under the strong arm holding her down. She's quickly yanked close against a hard chest and...a hard dick.

"Leaving so soon?" a raspy voice murmurs. Hot on her earlobe. Tingles in her lower back at the way the sound vibrates through her core. Unfair that he looks like *that* and has a voice that melts her down to honey.

"I've really got to go."

"Stay for a bit...*Patricia*." He tests her name on his tongue, buries his mouth in her hair and neck. Inhales deeply. God, is he smelling her? "It is Patricia, right?"

"Yes. And I have to go to work."

"It's a Sunday."

"Believe it or not, some people work weekends."

"Sounds shitty." The arms only tighten on her. His chin curled into her shoulder.

"The things I gotta do to stay alive in this town."

"Why don't you stay here and do something else?" Teasing fingers stroke down her belly. Down to the edge of her trimmed blonde bush. Grazing. She glances over her shoulder at him and two pairs of blue eyes connect. Feels like a static shock. A chemical reaction, heart stuttering in her chest. "*Fuck*, you're even prettier than I remember."

"Have to go." Patricia squirms, imagery of last night swarming her with every touch and word from him. Flashes of him grinding into her, coaxing out her release.

"Jesus, it's like I woke up next to Playmate of the Month" he purrs, hand drifting up, fingers smoothing strands of hair away to kiss her spine. "You should be Miss July."

Patricia's brows furrow, even as the slide of his tongue makes her break out in goosebumps, her hips pushing instinctively back into him. "What?"

"You know." His hand captures her breast. "Blonde. Smokin' hot. *Stacked.*" He gropes the fleshy curve of her ass. "Perfect bunny."

A bright red alert goes off in Patricia's head, urging her into action. "I have to go now." She elbows the ribs of the lech behind her and escapes. Tiptoes around the bed to find her things, arms folded over her breasts.

"Did I say something?"

She doesn't look at him. If she does, she'll get sucked into his horny thrall. "You basically called me a slut."

"No, I didn't."

"You said I look like a Playboy girl..." She drifts off, distracted, scanning the cluttered floor. Where the hell is her bra?

"Bunny," he quips. "Compliment, obviously."

"Didn't feel like one."

"I mean, I could have said you look like a porn star. You seem a bit classier than that though."

Patricia ignores him. Pretends she can't feel him soaking her in, leering.

"Why are you covering yourself up? A little late for modesty, baby."

"Because you gawk like a pervert. Feels like I'm under a microscope."

"With a body like that, you'd think you'd be used to it."

Patricia has no comeback. Keeps her gaze averted. She finds her black underwear laying on the hardwood, useless after getting soaked through the night before. Ugh, she should never forget to bring an extra pair. She retrieves her purse from the beige loveseat lining the wall, zips it open and stuffs her underwear in. Spots her fishnet stockings and rolls them up one leg at time.

There's a lewd sound of air sucked between teeth. "No panties, huh? I like it."

"Proving my point, pervert."

"Take it easy, sweetheart. Just admiring the view."

There's the clink of a cigarette lighting and Patricia glances up. It's embarrassing how hot she flares at the vision of him spread out on the pillows. A sleepy lion. Golden mane flowing out around his shoulders. Bedroom eyes travelling over her. Biceps rippling as he stretches. She swallows. Forces her gaze downwards.

That's when she sees something twisted. Her bra on the floor. Scarlet and lace. Another red alert.

"Wait." She picks it up by the strap. "Why is this here?"

"You took off all your clothes about a minute after we got in, remember?" he muses between drags.

"But I wore a black bra last night." She finally sees it at the edge of the bed, straps spread out like wings.

Then it hits her. She loaned her red bra to Amy a few days ago during a fashion emergency. Which would mean. No.

"Shit," Patricia breathes, disgust rising fast.

"What?"

“You were the one that Amy slept with?”

“Who?”

“The girl who wore this bra. Her name is Amy.”

“Fuck if I know,” he shrugs. “Was way more drunk that night.”

Patricia scrunches her nose. “So this would have happened Friday night?”

“I guess.”

Now Patricia knows exactly who Amy was referring to when she kept raving about hot sex with a blonde stranger yesterday.

“So you fucked my best friend the night before we did it.”

He sits up on his elbows, face going serious. “I didn’t know you guys were friends. Never even met you before last night.”

“It’s just...weird.”

“Fuck,” he sighs, hand running through blonde locks. A quick pull of smoke from his cigarette. “Look, if I had met you both on the same night, I would have absolutely picked you. Hands down. If it makes you feel any better.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Jesus, sorry I didn’t know you existed before I fucked whats-her-face,” he gripes, tamping his cigarette out in his overflowing bedside ashtray.

What a manwhore. The exact type she promised herself she’d stay away from, right down to the long hair and pretty face. It’s like the universe designed him to tempt her. Foolish of her to fall for it. Again.

“Her name is Amy.” Patricia repeats. She shoves the unholy bra in her bag. Grabs her gauzy black one from off the bed and puts it on, strategically, away from that prying gaze. “It’s fine. Whatever, I have

to go.”

Her eyes roam the room for her little black dress. No sign of it anywhere.

“Lookin’ for somethin’?”

The skimpy number hangs from his fingers. It seems even tinier in his grasp. She walks over and attempts to snatch it but he evades her. Another swipe but he does it again. She gives him a testing look, open palm extended.

“Give it back.”

“Come get it.” He sways the fabric back and forth, challenge in his eye.

He looks so pleased with himself. She could seriously strangle him.

“Look, what’s your name again?” she snaps. “Bob? You’re not being cute, okay. Give me my shit back.”

He gives her a genuinely annoyed glare. “The name’s Billy, sweetheart. And from the way you were screaming it last night, pretty sure you know that.”

Her whole body burns pink. She keeps reaching over him as he dodges, aware that he’s getting a great view of her tits, cleavage spilling. Frustration makes her straddle him, fighting for it. When she finally has the dress in her hands, the triumph is short-lived. She looks at his smirking face and knows she fell into an easy trap, her thighs tight around his waist. Big hands travel over her ass, grip her hips and squeeze. Uncanny electricity flickers between them and she freezes up. She’s staring into ocean-blue, paralyzed.

Then those eyes do that dreamy hooded thing and she’s in big trouble. Gets a rush of slick heat between her legs. Against his bare skin. Billy’s white teeth drag over his bottom lip.

“You’re so fuckin’ wet, gorgeous,” he murmurs. Appreciative fingers slipping between them to stroke her through her fishnets. Softly, with reverence. She pushes into his touch, can’t resist. “C’mon, stay for a

while. Wanna watch you come again.”

It's difficult to hide her hunger. Especially when his thumb swirls around her sensitive bud like that.

“I’m kinda sore,” she says weakly, breathless. Thighs quivering from the growing bliss.

It's the truth. They fucked three times in a row last night. Two times rough and raw, one time feverishly slow. She came so hard back to back she thought her soul left her body.

He writhes his hips up, persuasive, tease of a voice casting spells. “I’ll be real gentle, baby.”

She’s quickly approaching the sinful edge of the cliff Billy’s guiding her over. Pied Piper of Perversion. She glances at his alarm clock. Shit, she’s late.

“I gotta go.” She somehow tears herself away, bounding off the bed. Senses returning. She pulls her slinky dress over her head. Finds her acid-washed jean jacket and slides it over her arms.

“Wait, Trish.”

“Don’t think we’re on a nickname basis, buddy,” she snorts, adjusting her collar, ruffling her bedhead in the speckled mirror on the wall. Christ, she looks like hot trash. “No one calls me that, either.”

“Okay, *Patricia*,” he enunciates, arm folding behind his head. “When can I see you again?”

“I’m thinking never?” She slips her leather purse over her shoulder. Another glance in the mirror and she sees her fishnets have a run in them. Perfect.

“Seriously?” He chuckles but there’s a layer of offense under it. “You got fucked that good and you don’t want another round?”

Patricia’s head tilts back for a laugh, equally peeved. “God, you’re arrogant.”

There's no counterpoint for that. "At least let me give you a ride to work."

They wouldn't make it a block without him pouncing. "No thanks." She pulls on a black heeled boot. Hopping on one leg. Almost falls flat on her face.

"Stubborn chick, huh? Bet that's bit you in the ass more than once."

True, but she's not about to admit that. "You wish."

His mouth spreads into a sly grin as he perches up on an elbow. "I mean, I wouldn't mind biting it for you."

"Goodbye." She twists the doorknob. "Have a nice life."

"Wait—"

"*What?*" She spins to face him. Ready to burst. Not sure what sin she wants to commit, lust or wrath.

"I shouldn't have said that you looked like a Playboy bunny. What I should have said is that you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Way more accurate."

That shouldn't hit as hard as it does. She stands there, door quarter of the way open. His eyes are glued to hers, watching, waiting for her response. The corner of his mouth twitches. Cocky.

"You're good. I'll give you that," she says with a huff. The door slams shut behind her.

She makes her way down the stairwell to the lobby. Exits through the front doors, stepping out into light and heat. She spots a payphone across the parking lot and breathes a sigh of relief. Now she can call a cab.

Patricia's heels click against sparkling pavement as she tries to ignore how wet and swollen she still is where Billy played with her. Then she glances back at the old apartment building and remembers.

She gave him her number last night. How stupid of her.

The smart thing to do would be to screen her calls this week. Make sure she never talks to him again. She's got a gnawing feeling that if she's not careful he's going to sweep her up like a tornado. Fling her out into the abyss after he fucks her into oblivion.

Basically, it would be a complete mess.

It's shameful knowing how much she'd love every minute of it.

2. hysteria

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi guys. Finally finished this chapter!

I'm currently living out in the woods with very limited and sluggish Internet access so I'll probably be slow to reply to comments but I am reading them! Posting is a real bitch too but I'll try to stay consistent because I love it.

Hope you enjoy! :)

Patricia's in a bit of a pickle. You see, showing up at the office of Mcallister Sports and Recreation magazine in torn fishnets and a dress that could be confused for lingerie doesn't exactly fly there. Unfortunately, she doesn't have much of a choice. Either go to work, get gawked at and potentially fired. Or go home to get changed, be even more late and potentially fired.

She set herself up for failure today by sleeping over at Billy's. She's already been late three times in a month as it is. Now she's late yet again and looks like a cheap hooker. Not ideal. At least, not in an office environment.

It's so awkward when her personal and professional life collide. They want nothing to do with each other.

She arrives at the front door of the ugly grey building after shoving a wad of crumpled bills in her cabbie's waiting hand. Her stomach is in knots. Stress-sweat creeping down her armpits. Jean jacket buttoned up to her chin. Though it's not like the effort to cover up is going to matter. Her dress barely covers her ass.

The job is simple enough. Answer phone-calls. Enter data into a glitching computer. Get ogled by disgusting middle-aged boss. Answer more phone-calls. Get judgemental stares from Janice, the crinkled old lady typing at the desk across from hers. Make disgusting boss a fresh cup of coffee. Contemplate spitting in said coffee.

Contemplate why she spent years getting a Masters degree in Journalism just to land a job that a twelve year old could do. File papers. Listen to disgusting boss preach at her about how women are worse journalists than men because a real journalist tells the truth and women are too delicate to handle reality. Suppress the burning desire to scream for eternity.

It's unusual for Patricia to keep her mouth shut when someone says something stupid and sexist. The problem is she got fired from her last job for speaking up for herself. She can barely pay rent as it is and getting fired again is a scary thought. So half her work effort goes into biting her tongue. At this rate, she'll bite it right off. If she doesn't get sacked first.

Patricia manages to sneak into her tiny cubicle without being seen. She does the sign of the cross over her chest before she sits down.

*

Sundays are a particularly uncomfortable day to work at the office. Mainly because less than half the staff is present and it seems to make her boss, Mr. Jones, amp up the creep factor threefold.

"Patricia, that's a...sensational outfit you're wearing," he leers as she cautiously steps into his stuffy office and plops a stack of papers on his desk. "What's the occasion?"

"Laundry day," she says firmly, maintaining relentless eye contact. The kind that withers most men to dried-up weeds. She doesn't want him to think she's weak, a frail lamb he can nip at.

Unfortunately, Mr. Jones has far more confidence than anyone with such appalling hygiene should.

He smacks his thin lips, greedily scanning over the criss-crossed lines of her stockings. "Well, can't say I'm not a fan but you know the policy. This is an office, not a club. Cover up next time, please. And don't be late again."

Patricia feels a confusing wave of both gratitude and extreme

disappointment that she didn't get fired on the spot. "Yes sir, sorry."

"No problem, doll," Mr. Jones offers a yellow sneer, stroking his oily gray mustache. "You know you're my favourite girl. If I was younger...well, *watch out*, if you know what I'm saying. You'd have to beat me away with a stick." He breaks out into a cackle, contorts his face into something awful.

"Uh," Patricia inches towards the door, resisting the urge to knock his rotting teeth out. "I gotta...return a call. Excuse me. Very urgent."

He lets her go with a coy wave and the day cannot end fast enough.

Another pressing issue this morning is that she can't seem to stop fantasizing about Billy. It's driving her up the wall. She's beyond horny and it's pitiful with the no underwear-fishnets situation. She keeps shifting in her chair, trying desperately not to be wet. It's futile. She can still feel the strength of his fingers, his teasing mouth on her skin, the filthy-sweet nothings he purred in her ear mid-thrust.

She might have to wipe her seat down later.

Damn him.

If he ends up on her answering machine she cannot call him back. He's just a gross sleazebag she found in the bowels of a dingy dive bar. Bad news. The worst. The definition of a male slut. A distraction to finding a caring, wholesome guy that she can bring home to Ma.

A nice thought but realistically Ma wouldn't care if Patricia brought home a Hell's' Angel. Or a thief. Or an arsonist. Or care about anything in her life whatsoever.

And if Billy doesn't call...well, that's just as depressing. A disturbing part of herself wants to book it right back to his bed and follow up on that offer for round two.

Or is it technically four?

God, she's turning into a complete mess. If things don't get better soon she might cry. And she never cries.

The one hope on the horizon is the growing popularity of her zine, the only worthwhile thing in her life at the moment. The only thing she enjoys doing that she's actually good at. Talking to bands, taking pictures of them, and writing articles. The holy trinity.

Patricia ponders her other, more troubling talent: falling into bed with pussy-chasing musicians.

She's really got to stop that. Mixing business with pleasure is starting to wear thin.

*

Billy never calls that week.

Of course he doesn't. She turned him down flat, didn't she? Why would she expect him to call? She shouldn't be agonizing over this. She should be grieving her breakup with Derek, not obsessing about a near-stranger. Why are her thoughts and hormones suddenly being hijacked by this smarmy asshole?

Well, it helps a lot that he's hot as hell and made her come like it was his reason for being put on this earth. That's going to be pretty hard to forget.

And those intense blue eyes, looking deep into hers, electric, wanting...

She'll get over it. For now she'll straddle the exercise bike in her apartment, followed by breaking in her new vibrator. Keep them running constantly until her body goes numb and achy. Let that steam and disappointment out until she's empty.

So what if she never sees him again? This is just what the doctor ordered: a clean slate. No men allowed. Especially no *slutty* men allowed. No gorgeous, sexy, slutty men ever again. Ever. Not even for a quickie. Not even for a kiss.

How sad.

If only people looked on the outside what their souls were like on the inside. It would be easy to make good choices. Maybe Billy would look like a gremlin or something. A hideous creature from a dark lagoon instead of sin on legs.

Patricia doesn't want to think about what she'd look like.

*

The Doghouse, the raunchiest, rawest venue on the Sunset Strip, is going to be featuring a full weekend of back-to-back great local bands. This means Patricia's going to have a juicy spread in her zine. This means sheer, unadulterated joy. She's so excited to create, to experience the taste and vibrancy of the scene tonight. It's an endless love for her, the only thing that makes her feel alive. Well, except that other thing that she will absolutely not participate in because she is *healing* .

The key to getting backstage is to seem like you belong there. Simple. Look and act like a raging slut and you're set. This seems to be one of the very few situations in life where she's accepted with open arms for that. It took a lot of trial and error over the years to master the act without actually being a groupie.

Yeah, she sleeps with musicians, but it's never backstage or at their hotel. She doesn't follow bands up and down the strip. She goes to these shows to work. If she happens to bring someone home, that's a bonus.

So Patricia wears a dangerously low cut crimson bustier and the tightest blue jeans she owns. She gives her long, pale hair a bombshell blowout and paints her lips a deep brick red. She looks damn good and she knows it. She also knows her looks are her main way into getting these interviews and she's not going to squander that. Is it manipulative? Of course. Does she care? No. The results are worth it.

Her mother would be proud.

The lineup to get in The Doghouse is lengthy tonight, winding around the block. No problem. She doesn't recognize the bouncer this time but she runs up to the front of the line with feigned familiarity and gushes a "I haven't seen you in forever" in his blushing ear. Some easy flirting and a kiss on the cheek and she's through the door. This always works for her. Looking like she stepped straight out of a Poison video helps.

It's dark and packed and horny inside. Rough notes and rhythms pounding into her heart. A sexy thrum through the leopard skin and leather crowd. Sweat, cocaine, whiskey. Hair teased to fantastic heights and the peacock men looking prettier than the women. Patricia soaks it all in deep.

Maybe because she knows this frenetic prime of fun won't last forever.

Ma always used to tell her about the demise of the beatnik movement, the hippie heyday. What goes up must come down. The wheel is always spinning.

This is why she wants it all on paper. Memorialized. Recognized. Already the scene is starting to get too gaudy. A little stale. Too over the top. Too many drugs and too many pampered egos. She loves it all to death but something has to change. She can just feel it.

It's a good thing there's always talented bands ready to break through.

There's a wild-limbed guy wearing a bandana on the stage introducing the next band. It's hard to tell whether he's on speed or if he's just very into his job.

"...the next group are fresh outta the Bay area. We've gotten a lot of calls asking if they're ever gonna play here. Lucky for you, they all hauled ass to L.A a month ago. So you bitches better go wild for these fine felines in The Doghouse tonight. Here's Cat's Eye!"

Patricia's only heard one bootlegged tape from these guys and they're solid. More of a powerful, heavy sound than the majority of the hair metal bands on the strip. Apparently they did an overhaul with their

lineup several months ago before they relocated to L.A. New guitarist and drummer. She's curious about how the change will effect their sound.

The band filters onto the stage to the booming roar of the crowd and its the typical fare. Long hair and sleeveless band t-shirts. Tight leather. Nothing to write home about.

But wait.

Their drummer looks familiar.

Oh fuck no.

It's Billy. Settling himself behind the drum-kit. Shirtless and glowing and way too confident for his own good. Drumstick twirling naturally in his taped up fingers before he adjusts the elevation on the high-hat. He tests the kit with a short, fluid fill. Even with that tiny preview she knows right then and there he's no joke.

Shit, when he casually mentioned he was a drummer, she had no idea it was going to be for an actually good band. They were too busy banging to discuss details. Maybe she hoped he sucked so she wouldn't have another reason to be attracted to him. Any of these bands on the setlist tonight could be signed tomorrow. It's stiff competition.

After some minor tuning, the music starts up and it's hard for Patricia's jaw not to drop. Whatever changes happened were absolutely right for them. They're way better than the tape she heard. Tight as hell, playing right in the pocket. Their singer sounds so clear and pure. Their rhythm is harmonious yet chaotic. Their lead guitar actually sounds like a voice. And their drummer? Hits hard and quick as a machine gun. Flowing across the skins smooth as butter.

She knows that their lead singer, the Vince Neil look-a-like who's practically crawling on the stage right now should be the one getting her attention. But all she can see is the blonde beating the absolute hell out of the drums with a finesse that's startling. She didn't expect this at all. He's like Ginger Baker and John Bonham's lovechild.

And she should know, she's been on the Sunset Strip every weekend for four years now. She's seen a lot of fucking drummers.

They finish their short two song set to massive applause and Patricia practically has to pick her jaw up off the floor. She's in awe. Confused. Suddenly very nervous. She came here to interview the bands but now that Billy's in the mix everything is different. How the hell is she going to pull this off without it being super awkward or getting sucked into his bed again?

What's worse is she respects him now. At least his musicianship.

She doesn't like it. But the show must go on.

Patricia weasels her way backstage fast as lightning despite her fear, getting past security easily yet again. Cleavage and a smile moves mountains.

The room is only half-lit, a couple of bulbs burnt out. A few couches patched up with duct tape. There are already a bunch of equally dolled up girls back here in varying states of inebriation, laughing and swilling. Sitting on laps. A chick is snorting a white line off a mirror on her friends thigh. One dude has his hand up a girl's snakeskin skirt. No one suspects she doesn't belong there. Again, typical fare.

Patricia walks over to the catering table and grabs a soda, surveying the room with her heart pounding. She's done this before but she doesn't know what to expect now. Her stomach is in her throat. She recognizes a few members of Killowatt in here. The bassist gives her a short wave because she's talked to him before. Maybe she should start with them to grease the wheels.

Then Billy enters the room, glistening and...molten hot.

Patricia disintegrates. There's something even more attractive, more feral about him after he's played. Sparked right up and ready to go ballistic.

She's starstruck. She's vibrating. She wants to die.

He looks at her with surprise for a moment before grinning sharp.

Makes a sinuous path through the rockers and groupies, stepping on and over the coffee table to cross the room. It's flat-out intimidating, the animalistic energy making its way towards her. She can almost taste the adrenaline in his blood.

Then in a burst of motion he gets so close so quick, she's forced to sit on the edge of the table behind her. He's in between her legs. Hands on either side of her thighs, trapping her. Blue gaze primal in the dim glow surrounding them.

She wonders frantically if he's going to kiss her. Instead, he reaches behind her and grabs a bottle of beer, backing up just a smidge. Both a relief and a tease. It's alarming how much her body responds to his closeness. She feels like a ticking time bomb, ready to explode from the tension.

"How the fuck did you get back here?", he asks, excitement tinging his voice. Then he slowly scans over her low cut top and smirks. "Ah, I see...playing groupie tonight? I can help you out with that."

"No," she reaches into her purse and pulls out her tape recorder. Somehow her tone is way stronger than she feels. "Interviewing."

Billy makes an exaggerated glance to the wall next to them and back to her. On it there's a sign in big block letters that says NO PRESS.

She might have purposefully ignored that.

"Little rule breaker, are we?" His tongue skims over white teeth. "That's cute."

He's still way too close. Like any second he's going to plant his mouth on hers. Take her right here on the table in front of everyone. She likes how he smells, clean sweat and musky cologne. Likes the heat coming off his body. She doesn't want to but pheromones have their own agenda.

She straightens her posture, won't let herself look small. "I'm just going to talk to Cat's Eye. Ask some questions."

Billy shoots her a look of impatience. "Alright, I'm right here, baby. Talking."

"I mean, the rest of you. I'd actually really like to talk to your lead singer. He knocked it out of the park tonight."

She doesn't mention that the guy right in front of her is the best drummer she's seen in years. It would only open the floodgates to kindness. Intimacy. And she can't do that right now. Not with him.

"Nick?" Billy laughs, shakes his head. "Nick hates that shit. He'd make me answer the questions anyways."

She decides to be blunt. "I don't want to talk to you, Billy."

"Still got your panties in a twist, huh?" There's a glint in his eye like he doesn't believe her. "Who do you work for anyway? I thought you filed shit in an office."

"I have my own zine," she says awkwardly. She knows it sounds lame. She wishes she had a copy of it on her so she could show him that she's actually done this before. That she can write. "I talk to bands, review their shows and albums. That kinda stuff."

"Aww, adorable," he coos. Obviously not taking her seriously. No one does until she gives a bad review and they lose their audience overnight.

That infuriates her. "It's actually pretty well-known in these parts. Gives bands a leg up. Breaks them. Wouldn't hurt to be nice to me."

She knows how pathetic it is to threaten him with that, even if it's the truth. She *feels* pathetic. Awkward and perspiring. Aroused. He's still standing in between her legs, so close she can see the green flecks in his irises. She's overpowered by his magnetism. Fighting everything inside of her that wants to touch him. Kiss him.

She should move. She could easily if she wanted to. Why the fuck isn't she moving?

"I'm far too nice to you as it is," he says. "What's the name of this thing again?"

"Live Wire."

“Hmm, loving the Motley Crue reference, but uh-” he gets more cloying, condescending. “never heard of your fucking zine, sweetheart, sorry.”

“That’s because you’re new here. From San Francisco, right?”

“Yeah. Lived there for the past few years.”

Oh, what the hell. Patricia presses the record button on her tape recorder and lifts it between them. Billy's brow raises for a moment before he wraps his warm hand around hers, lifting the recorder to his lips, a mischievous light in his eyes.

“I’ve gotta headline for you,” he beams. “Trish here might be a sneaky opportunist, but by God if she doesn’t have the sweetest little pussy I’ve ever tasted.”

Patricia goes red-hot all over as she tries not to show any response to that. He’s speaking loud enough that a few of the guys from the other bands can hear him from a couch nearby. Snickering from behind bottles of Jack Daniels. She tries to pull her hand back but there’s no budging his fingers.

Then, still holding the tape recorder close to his mouth, he leans to speak in her ear, husky and low this time. “And for the record-and this better be front page-she also makes the prettiest sounds when she comes. *Especially* when she’s getting it from behind. Goes fucking wild for that, doesn’t she?” He looks at her with the most knowing smirk on his face as she sits there, open-mouthed.

Then he winks and walks away. Towards the real groupies.

What a douchebag.

*

Patricia does talk to another member of Cat's Eye. Sitting on the sofa, their guitarist, Dave. A soft-spoken guy with long curly dark hair and big molasses eyes. She plunks down next to him and discovers he's read a few issues of Live Wire since he moved here and doesn't mind

being interviewed. In fact, he seems pretty flattered by it. Apparently it doesn't happen often.

He's making her smile a lot, telling her how much he loves the zine, that he loves that a woman created it. He's a total cutie.

Then after a few minutes he ponders. "Did you turn Billy down or something?"

Patricia clears her throat, embarrassed that everyone saw that whole scene at the drinks table. "Why do you ask?"

"Usually when he comes onto a girl like that, they're fucking in the bathroom by now."

She stiffens up despite herself. Not surprising but still gross.

"I'm not really that type of girl," she says.

At least not in a backstage bathroom.

"I don't think he's too happy about it," Dave chuckles.

"What makes you say that?"

Dave motions with his chin towards the opposite end of the room. "Well, he's talking to that brunette in the miniskirt over there but he keeps glaring at you."

Patricia looks up and sure enough, Billy's leaning against the wall, beer in hand, staring at her with laser vision. He licks his lips when their eyes meet, then goes back to chatting to the brunette. The attention is a huge ego boost. She hates the thrill she gets from it. She doesn't want to feel anything at all.

"He could use some rejection in his life," she mutters.

Dave shoots her a grin. "Never seen it happen after a decade of knowing him but I agree."

She smiles back. "I guess there's a first time for everything."

Patricia and Dave keep chatting and she forgets this is an interview. She's getting a mountain of material but she's not recording anymore. Just enjoying herself. Dave's easy to talk to and has this subtle, kind way about him. Such a stark contrast to the blonde dickhead who won't stop scowling at her.

Then after another ten minutes or so, as she's laughing over another one of Dave's jokes, she feels a strong hand grab hers. Billy's. He pulls her off the couch to her feet.

"Time's up, sweetheart."

"What are you talking about?"

He's guiding her toward the door, hands firm on her bare shoulders. She likes the sensation more than she'd ever admit. "You've got a whole goddamn book's worth of info by now. More than enough."

"But I was having a really great conversation with Dave," she protests.

Billy positions her out into the hall and leans against the doorway. "Look, for one. Read the fucking signs." He motions to a second NO PRESS sign on the door. "For another, unless you're planning on sucking everyone's cocks, there's really no point in you being back here."

Patricia scoffs. "Pretty sure the only cock you're concerned about is your own, dude."

"You got me there," he shrugs.

"Maybe I was planning on sucking Dave's," she says, wide-eyed, hoping to freak him out.

Billy just laughs, unfazed. "Good luck with that. Dave's fruitier than a fucking pineapple."

"He's gay?"

"As the day is long."

Now that he mentions that it seems fairly obvious.

Huh, no wonder why she liked Dave so much. He wasn't trying to get in her pants.

"Come on, man, I wasn't bugging anyone besides you," Patricia continues. She gestures behind Billy at a half-naked drunk girl doing a questionable dance on the coffee table. "There are like ten other random chicks in there."

"Alright. You want in?" Billy gives a slow, mean smile as his eyes flicker over her bustier. "Take your top off."

"No." Patricia fumes, hands on her hips. Standing strong.

His fingers make a quick come-hither motion. "Gimme your panties then."

"What the actual fuck is your problem?"

To be fair, she very well might have handed her panties over if they didn't get ruined the second she saw him tonight. But there's no way she's going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that.

"Didn't think so," he takes a step back into the room, looking full of himself as usual. "Welp. Bye bye, Trish."

"Asshole," she huffs.

The only response is the door shut in her face.

3. the girl can't help it

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is intense y'all. Smut and explicit drug use ahead.

That Saturday afternoon, Patricia's sitting on her living room carpet in her silky bathrobe, back flat against the shiny flowerprint of her velour sofa. Bulky, black typewriter between her stretched out legs, a scribbled-on notepad at her side. Tape recorder in one hand, cup of hot coffee in the other. She takes a sip as she glances at her notes.

It's not looking good. Barely anything written and all haphazard. She's definitely going to have to make tonight count.

Patricia didn't end up interviewing any other bands yesterday, only watching a few more play before she left early. Feeling embarrassed about getting kicked out and not wanting to run into Billy again. She's sure she saw a glimpse of his perfect, leather-covered ass at the bar but that's about the instant she decided to go home.

It's a new world for her. She's never let a guy get to her like this. She doesn't even want to write. What is *happening* to her?

She knows she'll have to review Cat's Eye's live show and write up her interview with Dave no matter what she feels. She'd be insanely guilty if she didn't. They were just too good to ignore. She owes it to them, to the scene. People need to know.

Fuck Billy though. She'll barely mention him. She'll do it for Dave. She's got at least fifteen minutes worth of him talking and she knows he gave her ample info to work with.

So she rewinds her tape recorder and presses the play button.

"I've gotta headline for you..."

Oh god.

Patricia stops the tape, heart thundering. She gulps. Slowly clicks

play again.

“...the sweetest little pussy I’ve ever tasted...”

The hairs on her nape stand up, a sear of pleasure up her belly and back. She hits pause, suddenly short of breath.

Why is that so damn hot? Just as sexy on tape as it was in person, maybe even sexier knowing it’s something she can play over and over. The dark velvet of his voice. The memory of him so seductively close, making her flush, squirm in front of everybody. Breath warm on her earlobe, her neck. Did he realize what this was going to do to her later?

Yeah, he totally fucking did. An obscene love letter. A naughty treat just for her. Sealed with a wink.

She hates him.

Her fingers creep down towards the lacy black edge of her underwear. An automatic movement. Needy.

No. Is she actually going to do this?

Her fingers find herself soaked and ready. A rush of shame and burning lust as she starts rubbing her clit. Sensation already consuming. She lets herself sink into steamy reverie, vivid bright. Billy onstage. Between her legs backstage, in his bed. His naked body pressed to hers, hips moving like carnal poetry.

She’s rising. Flying high and fast, fantasy taking her for a violently erotic ride. She presses play once more.

“....the prettiest sounds when she comes...”

Patricia loses it, makes a sharp gasping sound. Bulldozed by the orgasm wracking her. Back arching against the couch. Heels digging into the carpet.

“...goes fucking wild for that, doesn’t she?...”

She stops the tape, chest heaving, staring at the ceiling as her head

swims. Another hit of shame. And the strange urge to do it all over again.

Holy hell, what is *wrong* with her?

*

Patricia's dreading seeing Billy play tonight, but she promises herself she won't get distracted this time. She needs this story. She needs to get over it. Trample her dumb infatuation.

The night air crackles with anticipation as Patricia steps into the Doghouse once more. Cat's Eye plays a full set and again, they are amazing. And again, Patricia cannot take her eyes off Billy. He's such a dynamic player. Has this sensitive smoothness mixed with brutal power that reminds her of the night they spent together...

She seriously has to stop. This is ruining everything. Him and his stupid, pretty blonde head should move back to San Fran so she can get some peace. Everything was just fine when he wasn't around. She didn't feel self conscious about being here. How dare he make her feel self conscious in *her* territory?

As she tries to build up the courage to sneak backstage again, she goes out to the crowded back patio area to bum a cigarette off of some drunken side-burned dude. She doesn't even smoke but she's that anxious.

She leans against the brick wall, staring out into the colourful neon glow of the Sunset Strip, smoky burn of tobacco in her throat. The air is soft and warm. There's the thud of bass and wailing guitar echoing into the black sky. Comforting despite the chaos.

Patricia feels Billy next to her before she sees him.

"Fancy seeing you here."

She takes a glance to her left and there he is. Bare chested and gleaming sweat and Patricia has to stop herself from liquifying. Christ, does this guy ever wear a fucking shirt?

"Nothing fancy about it." She uses all her will power to look away.

Wonders if he can somehow tell that she came to his voice this morning. "Smells like piss."

"Such a lovely girl." He takes a step closer.

"What the hell do you want?" She must sound dramatic because she just drew a few glances.

"*Damn*," he chuckles, "can't a guy say hello these days?"

She takes an unpracticed drag off her cigarette. Tries not to cough. "Not if it's you."

"Look, maybe we got off on the wrong foot."

"Don't think there could be a right foot." Patricia takes another peek at his bronze skin, the opaque stare seeking her. She gets uncomfortably hot in her rose pink minidress.

"What about a left?"

Patricia rolls her eyes. He grins slowly when their gazes meet for a second too long and that spark she desperately wants to smother flashes up her spine. It's those damn eyes. Since when did she get so weak over a stupid pair of eyeballs?

Billy takes out a zippo lighter that somehow fits in his skintight jeans. Retrieves a cigarette from behind his ear and lights up with a deep drag. Exhales silky smoke into the evening dark and scans her over. "You look beautiful. I mean, you'd look beautiful wearing a garbage bag, but pink suits you."

Apparently the most basic lines work coming out of his mouth. Patricia goes frigid to combat the girlish blush she's taking on. "Whatever, man."

Billy takes another step closer, shoulder leaning against the wall next to her. Spicy cologne tingling her nostrils. He lowers his voice, meeting her eyes with stern honesty, intimacy. "You're really going to keep acting like you're not into me? I'm not dumb, Patricia. Pretty easy to read between the lines here."

He's right. This isn't grade school. She decides to let one layer of frost melt, lowers her voice in turn. "Just because there's some sexual chemistry, doesn't mean that I have to do anything about it. Or that I have to pretend to like you."

"If you gave me a fucking chance maybe you would," Billy counters. "What's with the cold shoulder anyways? Never met a chick who got so icy on me in my life."

She highly doubts that. "Sleeping with my best friend didn't help."

"Like I said, would've chosen you over her in a heartbeat. Still don't remember her damn name."

"Amy." Patricia reminds him with annoyance. "Then you stole my dress and made me late for work. I thought I was going to be fired." She would have been late whether he had taken the dress or not but that won't help her point.

He puts his hands up, yielding. "Just playin' around. Sorry I made you late."

She wasn't expecting any sorries. Still not enough though. "And saying I look like I'm in Playboy? Upon waking? Not exactly romantic."

Billy smirks, reaching out to casually run his knuckles over the short sleeve of her dress. Testing it's satin smoothness. "Okay, I *am* dumb. You look like a goddess."

Here it comes: the seduction. Patricia braces herself for the onslaught. She's not ready. "You kicked me out of the backstage room."

He goes quiet for a beat.

"I might have been a bit jealous of how much attention Dave was getting," he admits to her surprise. "Y'know, in comparison to the guy that actually fucked you."

"And behaving like a cranky three year old is really the way to catch my eye."

"I'm still waiting for puberty to hit," he quips, biting his bottom lip with a grin.

Patricia does a sardonic scan over his muscle, the span of his shoulders. "That's terrifying to think about."

He flicks ash to the ground. "Tell me about it."

Patricia's eyes narrow. "You said Dave was gay."

"Yeah, but you were batting your lashes at him and if anyone's gonna turn him straight it's you."

She can't help but crack a smile at that. "Dave did imply you don't like being ignored."

"True, but I don't think you like being ignored either."

He's right again. "No?"

Billy glances over tight pink fabric, a point in itself. "You wouldn't wear a dress like that if you wanted to be ignored."

She feels suddenly naked, like he can see underneath the satin. "But maybe I only want to be seen and not approached."

"Unfortunately that's not how this shit works, sweetheart." Smoke spirals around him, hypnotic. "I'm just a moth to your flame."

Oh, he's good. She's flattered, prickling with pleasure. "Do you like, practice these lines in a mirror before you go out?"

He gives a warm laugh. "Might be three years old, but I'm still charming as fuck."

Patricia lets herself smile for a moment before she pauses, assessing him carefully. "Why are you being so honest with me?" She's used to elusive liars. Expects them.

His face goes serious. "I don't play hard to get. If I want something I go after it with everything I've got. Always."

Patrica swallows. There's another beat of silence as she tries to gather her senses. She's slipping, starting to drown in his charm, his intensity. She grasps at straws. "You never called."

"Jesus," he takes an exasperated pull from his cigarette, "did you write a fucking list or something?"

"I remember everything."

"Should be damn obvious why I didn't call," his expression goes a little dark. "You said you never wanted to see me again."

"Good point." She knew that wasn't a fair accusation on her part, but she's floundering here.

He softens. "To be honest, I kinda hoped I'd run into you again and by that time you'd cool down." His mouth breaks into a devilish smile. "Knew it wouldn't take long."

"But I haven't cooled down."

"Nope," he shakes his head, "still hot for me as ever."

"And you're still full of it," Patricia snorts. She moves an inch closer to him. Takes a breath, decides to fess up. "Also, I just got out of a relationship like...a week ago."

Billy freezes up for a moment, cigarette halfway to his mouth before he takes a hearty drag and drops it to the ground. Grinds it under his heel before he matches her movement, looking down at her. "Why wasn't that the first thing you said?"

"I'm not as open as you are."

"You seem pretty blunt to me."

"Blunt, not open." Her sentence hangs in the air. Says maybe more than she wanted but she's too entranced to overthink it. Attention now absorbed by the inviting slope of Billy's bottom lip.

Patricia meets Billy's eyes fully, a mirroring storm of blue. He's taking her in like she's something precious. Ash from her neglected

cigarette burns her bare leg but she ignores it, drops the stub to the ground. There are still other people here but she's long forgotten them. The music too. Dissolved into the night.

Billy closes the remaining space between them like he can't help himself. Faces almost touching. Potent energy so strong she gets chills. A wild fever. "I just want to kiss you. Pretty harmless."

Nothing with Billy could be harmless. Everything is weighted with potential combustion. And the way he's looking at her now implies way more than just kissing. Calloused fingers graze down the bare skin of her arm. One little movement and she's ablaze. Smouldering embers now a forest fire. If he kisses her she might burn down to ash.

But he's leaning in and his eyes are galaxies, and his mouth looks more alluring than should be allowed.

Just a kiss. Harmless.

"Okay", she whispers.

Warm lips meet hers. Slow, soft and laced with dark desire. A floaty-drunk feeling. A gateway drug. A sensual flick of his tongue against hers before he backs away, face slack, eyes heavy-lidded with hunger. Patricia blinks dumbly for a moment before she goes in for another hit. Just one more.

And another.

And another.

*

Ten minutes later Patricia's in the tiny backstage bathroom, bent over the sink with her panties around her knees and her dress pulled up over her waist. The tip of Billy's cock teasing her clit, her dripping entrance, aching for him.

"You're too fucking sexy," he rasps against her earlobe, one hand reaching down the front of her dress to play with her breast, her delicate nipple now showing dusky-pink in the mirror. Lust-filled eyes flicker over her reflection. "Can't decide what part of you gets

me harder. Wanna look at you all at once.”

If he doesn't put his dick in her she might snap. “Just fuck me before I have a moment of clarity, please.”

A swift spank on her bottom and she gasps. Gushes on his dick pressed tight against her. “You giving me sass, baby?”

Patricia tries to stabilize her feet as the head of his thick cock pushes in, slowly inching, stretching. Feels even better than she remembered.

“Your pussy's so goddamn perfect.” He tastes her neck. Teeth gently bite. Arms wrapping tight around her.

He grinds up into her with a groan, starts snapping his hips. Total control in his stroke. Nothing sloppy about it besides how freakishly wet she is. She can't believe how deep inside her he moves. It's overwhelming.

“That feels so good, ” Patricia's knuckles tighten on the edge of the sink.

“This feel better?” One hand reaches down to caress her clit and her legs quake.

It's unnatural how fast she's racing towards the finish line. Her ex could only make her come every once in a while. Her body is just so responsive in Billy's hands. Pure putty.

“Shit,” she helplessly clenches around him. Forehead touching the glass. “Yeah, just like that.”

He keeps going at a steady pace. Doesn't take long before her climax is on the horizon. She's so close. He's speeding up. Working her. Oh god, just a little more, just a little bit-

Billy stops. Stone-still, a vice grip around her. Fingers paused against her wetness.

“Wanna go out sometime?” he asks out of nowhere. Light. Casual. Like they just met on a park bench. Like she's not ass-up over a leaky

faucet with his dick jammed in her.

This proves it. He's evil.

She's dazed. Head fuzzy, shaken out of a dream. "*What?*"

"I wanna take you out, Patricia," he murmurs, voice gruff against the curve of her ear. Shifts so his cock is buried to the hilt. "Wanna get to know you."

She's going insane. Trapped against the sink, pushed onto her tip toes. Impaled deep and held tight. No escape. "Are you actually asking me out while you're inside me?" Her voice sounds so shrill.

"Are you actually going to turn me down while I'm inside you?"

"Fucking hell, Billy. I can't think right now."

"Is that a yes?" His hips writhe into her and she tries to quiet a groan. His fingers start circling again as he moves. She's dancing on the edge of her orgasm. Tantalizingly close.

She's going to come any second. No will or brain power. Reduced to a whining mess. She grunts out words in time with his hard thrusts, now getting rougher, faster. Porcelain digging into her hip bones. Filthy-loud sound of wet skin slapping filling the tiny room. "Yes. Okay. Fuck. Whatever. You want. Oh. My. God. Billy. Please-"

He stops abruptly again. Patricia's not sure whether she's about to cry or spontaneously burst into flames. "Friday night. I'll pick you up at eight."

"Jesus Christ, Billy." She's never been this desperate to come before. Never been this hysterical during sex. "I'll go. Just fuck me already. What the fuck."

Billy chuckles. Kisses her on the cheek, gloating at her in the mirror. "You're cute."

His hips continue their grind and in seconds she comes so hard she almost pulls the sink right off the wall, whole body spasming. Sparkles and bursts of light within. Overstimulated by him still

rutting sharp into her. Whimpering and wrecked.

He's not far behind. "Where do you want me to come?"

"On my ass," Patricia mumbles, barely able to form the words. Drifting in euphoria but still aware that she doesn't want to be leaking Billy's jizz all over the venue.

A few more thrusts and he pulls out, groaning, shooting his load on her. Sticky-hot on her skin. He sighs heavily. Rests his forehead on her shoulder, sweaty and panting. Hands stroke over her breasts, her thighs, her hips. Kneading her flesh tight at first. Getting more and more gentle. Almost soothing.

A moment later, Patricia reaches over and pumps some paper towel out of the dispenser. Hands it over her shoulder to him. Uses a piece to dab at her wetness as he wipes his come off her. It all feels strangely mechanical through her haze. She can't feel her legs. Pins and needles and numbness.

Billy tosses balled-up paper towel in the trashcan adjacent to them. She hears his fly zip while she shimmies her panties up her legs and pulls her dress back down over her hips. Turns to face him and powerful arms twine around her again. His mouth presses to hers with lingering heat and she kisses him back, a confused neediness behind it. Still trembling. Vulnerable.

"Always so damn good with you, Trish," Billy finally says. He cups her face, thumb stroking down her cheek. A softness in his gaze that makes her heart flip. "You drive me fuckin' wild."

"It was nice," she nods awkwardly, an uncomfortable combination of embarrassment and the urge to hug him as hard as she can rippling through her. Must be all those bonding chemicals released when you orgasm with someone. When they hold you after. "It was also the weirdest way to ask me out ever."

"But it worked." Billy kisses her again, smiling, a childlike eagerness in him that she doesn't recognize. "Come hang out backstage. You can stay for however long you want. Promise I won't kick you out."

She starts putting up a wall. Yet another layer. “Even if I talk to Dave for hours?”

He nuzzles her. Distracted by the ridge of her collarbone, licking. “I’m satisfied with knowing I just fucked you boneless, so go right ahead.”

She’s going stiff, guilt pulling at her. “What if I ignore you all night and bring another guy into the bathroom?”

Billy lifts his head, mouth twisting. Caught onto her game. That familiar lewd charm coming through but no humour in it. “Not like anyone else can fuck you like that. You’ll come crawling back anyway. I’ve got you hooked now, baby.”

Her worst fear.

“Wow, so many assumptions,” She gives him a demeaning pat on the shoulder.

He looks disappointed. Cold. He lets her go. “I’m gonna grab a beer. See you out there.” She watches him leave the restroom, door shutting behind him. Air chilling her skin without his embrace.

Patricia takes in her surroundings for the first time, completely oblivious to them until now. Black walls covered in a rainbow of graffiti and band posters. Dirty black-and-white checkered floor scattered with toilet paper. A used syringe by the toilet. She cringes. Loathes herself.

She glances back in the mirror and her lipstick is faded pink around her kiss-bruised mouth. Skin damp with perspiration. Sex hair haloing around her flushed face.

A messy slut.

Patricia rummages through her purse and tries to put herself together, but she feels delirious. Ashamed of herself for doing the exact thing she said she wouldn’t do. Still vibrating with woozy aftershocks. Legs unsteady.

She gives herself a few minutes. Drinks water straight from the tap.

Breathes deeply. Reapplies her makeup and smooths her hair back down. She smiles in the mirror and her mouth looks isolated from her body.

When Patricia enters the backstage room, it's the same scene as before. Bands and groupies. Drinking, snorting and laughing. Except this time she's no longer playing a part. No different from the girls sitting in laps, flirting, waiting for their shot. No line drawn in the sand. No act. Just her mother's daughter. Regret fills her like a poison, acid in her belly.

Billy's smoking, sitting on the far end of one of the couches with Dave next to him. His mouth quirks in a half-grin around his cigarette when he sees her. Eyes sparking with their shared sin. Wicked. Patricia doesn't return it. Too overwhelmed by self-loathing to acknowledge him. So clear now that she was blinded by lust.

She sits down next to Dave, grateful for the barrier between her and Billy. She forces a tight-lipped smile towards those sweet, brown eyes. Looking for some kind of comfort for her stupidity. Dave just nudges her arm and winks.

He knows.

Humiliated, she looks away and pulls at her ear. An anxious reflex. That's when she notices she's missing a hoop earring. Billy must have fucked it off her.

"Be right back," she says. Grateful for a reason to leave. So quiet and meek she's not sure anyone heard her.

She exits the room. Crosses the hall and tests the bathroom door, unlocked. When it opens, she almost screams.

Cat's Eye's singer, Nick. On his knees. Syringe between his fingers, needle sticking straight into his forearm. He looks up at her with dull, green eyes. Sweat-damp peroxide locks molded to his scalp. Heavy-limbed. Lost.

"Shit," Patricia breathes, unable to look away. Frozen in the doorway. "Sorry." She slams the door shut and scurries down the

hall, nausea making her dizzy.

She leaves The Doghouse without a backwards glance.

*

Patricia's Hollywood apartment is only a fifteen minute walk from the Sunset Strip. It feels like an hour tonight.

Her feet can't seem to move quickly enough. Feels like wading through thick syrup, like she's being chased by a monster in a nightmare. Except the monster is her. The path she's chosen, the mistakes she's made, the things she's seen. Piling like bodies in a shallow grave.

As soon as she's back in the safety of her apartment, she collapses on the brown living-room carpet and stretches out flat on her back. A starfish. Letting the floor hold her, ground her. A thing she does when it's all too much. A daily ritual lately.

Her head is swimming. What the hell just happened?

She flashes back to her kinky encounter with Billy over the sink. She has to admit, despite her guilt, it was incredibly hot. Passionate. She knows it always will be with him. Masturbation material for a lifetime. Every time she remembers her back flat against his bare chest, his persistent strokes, her body heats up, betrays her. She plays the memory over and over again like she did with the voice recorder this morning.

But the shame. It bites down to the bitter marrow and won't let go.

What did she think was going to happen? Play with fire, get burned. It's a saying for a reason. She should never have spoken to him tonight. And now she's agreed to go on a fucking date? Does the way it happened even count? She wasn't in her right mind. Drugged on pleasure. Would she have said yes if he wasn't fucking her?

If he had kept flirting with her like he did outside the venue tonight, yes, she probably would have. He charmed her right out of her panties. Just like the first night they met. Except this time she actually liked him for a second.

But it's wrong. All wrong.

And the scene he's part of? Cocaine is one thing, but heroin? Another fucking story. One she's already witnessed too much of. Another reason to stay away. Danger. Red alert.

Sin on the Strip. Bathroom sex and bloody needles. A world ruled by vice, common as candy. Thankfully she only participated in one tonight. Still a part of her left she can hold safe. No drugs. She knows herself too well. If she started, she'd never stop.

She also knows she doesn't have a spread for this weekend's event at The Doghouse. Just fifteen minutes of tape with Dave and a few glimpses of a couple of bands that failed to impress her nearly as much as Cat's Eye.

She gets an idea. A reluctant one at first, but soon it's all she can think about.

What if she featured just Cat's Eye instead of multiple bands? Despite her disastrous choices with Billy, his group deserves the attention. She knows no one this weekend held a candle to them. No one in the past *year* of shows she's seen can touch them.

Maybe instead of the date, she can interview Billy. Star drummer in the spotlight. And then she can find the other members and give them each an individual interview. People would stop and take notice. Go crazy for them if they saw them play live. Cat's Eye could rule the Sunset Strip.

That thought fills her with glee, coming at it from the journalist side of her brain, the gushing fan. Switched from despair to total excitement. Patricia sits up, beaming with the pleasant rush of knowing exactly what she must do.

Then her eyes glance towards the answering machine on her sofa's little side-table. Flashing red. Four new messages. She crawls over, a terrible lump in her throat. Hesitating for a second before she presses play.

It's not Billy.

“Patricia, babydoll. Why won’t you answer my calls? I’m sorry, okay? She didn’t mean anything to me. You’re *everything* to me. I made a mista-”

Next.

“I’m lonely. I miss you so much. I love you. Nothing’s the same without you. Why won’t you-”

Next. This time spoken with manic edges. Clearly on something strong.

“You’re a bitch, Patricia. You think just because you look hot and went to some bullshit university, you’re special? Too good for everyone? You’re not special. Nobody gives a shit about you, just like your parents never did. You’re only good to fuck. You’re just a stupid bitch and a whore, and-”

Fucking *next*. Her finger shakes against the button.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, babydoll. I love you. Love you so much. I want you back. I swear, It’ll be different this ti-”

Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete.

She’s livid. Anger eating her alive. Heart torn from hearing Derek’s voice again. From his ugly words mixed so easily with endearments of love. A part of her misses him, even if she hasn’t shed a tear yet. But the stronger part doesn’t suffer fools. Not after that third message. Once an asshole, always an asshole. Once a cheater, always a cheater. Once a dog, always a dog. A whole year wasted on yet another lying fuckhead.

The pain she hasn’t been feeling is now cutting off her breath. Rising so rapidly in her chest and up her throat, her eyes water. No. She won’t cry for him. She won’t cry for him. She won’t-

The phone rings. For a split second she wants to rip the phone cord out of the wall.

Instead, she picks up on the third ring. Not sure she has enough air to speak. “Hello?”

“Oh good, you’re home.”

She’d know that timbre anywhere. Oddly soothed by it. Wants to keep hearing it so she’ll forget Derek’s messages. Forget that she’s a stupid bitch that nobody gives a shit about.

“Sorry I didn’t say bye, Billy,” she croaks. She can hear honking and street noise in the background. Laughter and screaming and the distant thud of rock music. Must be on a payphone.

“You okay?” His voice rumbles low in her ear. Sounds concerned. “Was I...too rough or something? If I fucked up, I’m sorry.”

Out of all the sorries tonight, the last one she expected was from him. Technically, his second one. She takes a deep gulp of air, tries to calm her voice, stay detached. Unaffected. “I mean, you probably need professional help with the asking me out thing, but I like it rough. Would’ve punched you if I didn’t.”

He’s not convinced. “You sure? You sound upset.”

“I’m having a moment, but it’s not about that.”

“So...you still want me to pick you up on Friday?” For once he sounds unsure of himself.

She pauses, feeling it out. Allowing herself to turn him down if instinct says no. “Sure, let’s do it.”

“Cool.” A relieved sigh. “Why’d you leave like that? Thought you wanted to hang backstage.”

“Uh...” Patricia plays with the carpeting, wonders if he knows that Nick is into smack. “I saw your lead singer shooting up and I kind of flipped out.”

There’s a heavy breath. “Jesus. Fucking Nick. Sorry you had to see that.”

“I know it’s a regular thing out here, but I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it.”

"It *shouldn't* be a regular thing. It's stupid as fuck. Nick seriously needs to get his shit together if we're going to go anywhere as a band."

"This happens a lot?"

"Lately, yeah. He's been having a little too much fun since we got here. Kinda putting a stall on things." There's a tinge of resentment between words. "But hey, guess that's the fucking scene. Get high and overdose. Then get up on stage the next day. Everyone thinks they're fuckin' Superman."

"Well, just as long as you don't get caught up in it." A serious risk out here. "Easier said than done though, when you're always around the stuff."

"I don't touch needles," he assures her. "I went through a coke thing a few years back but that's over."

"You don't have any addictions?" she asks out of curiosity.

"Just your pussy." No hesitation. "You?"

She smiles wide. Throbs between her legs, muscle memory. "Music and orgasms."

He does that dark chuckle. Smooth. "I think you and I are going to get along just fine..."

"Yeah..." Now she feels kind of shitty for continuing to be sexual with him. Makes her feel cheap and it's all over with him now anyway. She needs to be upfront. No tiptoeing. "I have to be honest with you. I'll hang out on Friday, but we're not going to have sex ever again."

There's a long pause.

"Okay?" No trace of belief in his tone. "Mind breaking that down for me?"

"I don't think we're right for each other," she says in her firmest voice. Her work voice. "I got what I needed out of my system and I think it's best if things stay platonic. We're going to have to see each

other a lot now that you've moved out here, so we should learn to be friends."

"Friends?" He says the word like it's a vile taste in his mouth.

"I figured on Friday, I could interview you for the zine instead. You'll get your own feature and everything. It'll be fun."

"Uh-huh," Billy sounds like he's trying not to laugh or he's extremely annoyed. Probably both. "You're hilarious, you know that?"

"I'm serious."

"Alright. I'll tell you what. I won't fucking touch you."

"Good, we're on the same page."

"What I can't promise is that you're not going to touch *me*."

"It's not going to happen," she vows, but there's a knowing in his voice that makes her second-guess herself, needling into her resolve.

"Whatever you say, baby," A sarcastic lilt, like he's predicted everything that's going to happen already.

"Great." She keeps her words light, steady. Over it. "Glad we can be friends."

There's a little bout of silence before Billy chuckles again. Amused. "I like you a lot, Trish."

That pierces her armor. Makes her melt, still tender from Derek's cruelty. "Why?"

"You're funny, pretty and delusional. The whole package."

Oh. She deflates at that last point. "Is that all?"

"You're also kinda mean and it turns me on," he purrs. "You ever whipped anyone before?"

Her eyes roll. "Seek help, dude. You clearly need special treatment."

"I'm trying, baby, but you don't do that now apparently."

"How sad for you." It's time to end this conversation, not going anywhere but down the back alley of innuendo and underhanded compliments. "I'm gonna go. See you Friday. Bet you can't keep it in your pants til then."

"Why? Would you be jealous if I couldn't?" His tone sounds dangerous. Patricia can almost see that cheshire grin taunting her.

"Not at all," she clips.

"You can't lie worth a damn, so I'll dig out my chastity belt just for you, princess."

"Amazing. Bye for now, Billy."

"Bye, Trish," his voice deepens, sweetens. "Don't go too crazy thinkin' about me. I know it's hard not-"

Patricia hangs up.

Then she sinks into the floor and tries not to ruminate about Billy or Derek or anything else in her fucked up life.

4. patty-baby

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey, thank you all who have read and commented thus far. You give me so much joy! Still in the wifi-hating woods but trying my best to reply to comments asap.

This one has some explicit descriptions of drug use ahead.

August 16, 1969. Woodstock, New York.

It looks like rain again. Gray clouds hang heavy over the masses.

Patricia licks her lips, parched, mouth dry as dust. She wants the rain to fall fast so she can drink up. Her stomach rumbles. She hasn't eaten anything since yesterday. A dinner of half a soggy peanut-butter and jelly sandwich.

When is Ma coming back? Patricia's been sitting in her little orange tent all day, watching the sun travel over the sky. She hasn't seen her since this morning, gone to wander the crowd.

She looks out onto the muddy field. So many people. They look like swarming ants. She's afraid of them all.

Last night in the pouring rain, Ma took her deep into the thick of them to hear the music. Mist got in Patricia's eyes, mud in her sandals. Ma held her hand at first but then let go and Patricia lost sight of her, swallowed by the shapeless mob. The music was so loud it hurt her ears. Stage-lights dazzling through darkness.

A lady with wildflowers in her hair grabbed Patricia and lifted her into the air for an unwanted dance. A big man stepped on her foot with heavy boots, made her yelp. When she looked up, his hair was messy and his eyes didn't look right. She saw a twirl of Ma's cherry-red dress and ran towards it. Clutched on with all her strength but then got batted away.

Then Aaron came and swooped her up. Sat her on his solid shoulders and she held onto the ends of his long, golden hair. Safe from the scary people. A brown man was sitting on the stage with a strange guitar, playing even stranger music. She liked it. *Exotic*. A new word she learned in her Nancy Drew book.

She's read her book twice today while waiting for Ma.

Too loud. The music is too loud. Sometimes it sounds like Ma's records. Other times it sounds like angry bees.

She just wants to sleep. It's so hard to sleep with all the noise, all the people, all the mosquitos. Her legs are bumpy and red from bites now. She picks at her scabs and they bleed. She can't stop scratching. Feels too good. She plays a game with herself to see how long she can go without touching them. Not very long.

Patricia peeks her head further out of the tent. Peers at the thousands of grown-ups that she doesn't trust. She's seen other kids but she's afraid of them too. Went up to one of them yesterday to play and a gapped-tooth boy touched her where he's not supposed to and she kicked him in his special place. Slapped his freckled cheek as hard as she could and he cried like a baby.

Patricia makes a decision. She's going to find Ma.

She gets out of the tent and journeys across the muddy field, tripping over tarp and garbage. Over dancing feet. The rain starts and the mud goes slippery. She sticks her tongue out and catches drizzle but it's not enough. Keeps walking and walking but Ma is nowhere in sight.

The sun is beginning to set, light leaving. People tower over her and she's invisible and a girl somewhere is saying *don't eat the brown acid, man, didn't you hear?* A new song starts and the music is squealing and thumping. It makes her feel like she's had too much sugar. Like she needs to run in circles and scream. She would but she'll get stepped on.

Patricia doesn't know what to do. Wants to sit down but it's muddy. Wants to go back to her tent but it's too far away. Wants to eat but

she doesn't know where food is. She can't see the orange tent anymore. Just legs and arms and shaking hair. Wide, laughing mouths and eyes that don't focus. She can't go back anymore. Can't find her way.

The grown-ups are sliding in mud on purpose. Laughing like they're crazy. Some of them are naked and Patricia tries not to stare.

Then she slips and falls and gets mud all over her paisley dress, her bottom, her legs. She sits there in brown sludge, exhausted. Tears and rain slip down her face. Her fingers dig into a handful of wet mud, getting under her nails.

Patricia used to eat mud when she was smaller. Ma would always hit her hand and tell her to stop. She pushes the goop into her mouth now and it's not that tasty. She swallows anyway.

A lady with dark-orange hair under a big straw hat comes up to her. Her long violet dress drags through the muck. She has kind brown eyes. Nice looking.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" she asks, squatting down. Smooths wet hair from Patricia's face.

"I can't find Ma," Patricia sniffles, wiping at hot tears with grubby little fingers. "Can't find her."

The lady takes her dirty hand in hers and she's warm. Smooth and soft as silk. "Okay, honey. We're going to go find her together, alright?"

Patricia nods. She's not supposed to talk to strangers but she trusts this red-haired angel. Her eyes aren't weird like everyone else's.

"What does your mom look like?"

"Pretty. Blonde hair, red dress." Patricia starts crying again because her stomach feels like it's eating itself. "B-big boobies."

The lady laughs for a moment before she saddens, squeezing Patricia's hand. "Let's go get her."

They walk for a long, long time. All the way to the front of the big stage. Music so loud her brain might melt out her ears. The lady guides her through the wild crowd and no one steps on her this time. The rain stops. The sun dips behind the trees and stage-glow lights the way.

Patricia sees Ma. Side of the platform, near the speakers. Back turned. Curves hugged by her damp, red dress. Blonde hair down her back. Hips and hands moving like snakes.

“That’s her!” Patricia jumps up and down in a giddy burst. Then she stops in her tracks, hesitant, planning ahead. She wants to see Ma but she wants to eat more. She turns to the nice lady. “Do you have food?”

Auburn eyebrows push together. “Can’t your mom get you food, sweetie?”

Patricia looks at the sticky ground, shakes her head. “She forgets.”

Another sad face. The lady reaches in her purse and pulls out a tiny, clear package of broken crackers. “Here, honey. You can eat this, okay?”

Patricia gets handed over with a few words and Ma gives the lady a not-real smile. A man in a green bandana hangs his arm around Ma’s shoulders and he’s not Aaron. The nice lady disappears into the crowd.

“Pat!” Ma leans forward to inspect. Angry. “Were you eating mud again? You’re covered in it! I told you not to do that!”

Patricia’s bottom lip quivers, more tears welling up. Ma is having a mean day. “I f-fell.”

“Nice story, Pat. I can see it around your mouth.” Ma grabs her wrist and it hurts. “You wanna spanking?”

“No, Ma.”

Ma grips harder. “Then don’t do it ever again.” Patricia’s wrist gets dropped, aching.

Bandana Man is not as handsome as Aaron and smells funny. Like fruity smoke and wet socks. "Guessin' this is your kid?"

"Yeah, had to drag the brat along."

"She's cute." The man meets Patricia's eyes. Gives a quick smile. "Muddy, but cute."

"Don't get any ideas now." Ma nudges him and giggles.

Patricia goes rigid, afraid that the man will touch her. Stroke her skin and hair. Tell her she's pretty and small and kiss her while she pretends to sleep.

"Ma," she asks softly, "Where's Aaron? He said I could sit on his shoulders again."

Ma glances at Bandana Man with a nervous smile. Looks down at Patricia with pale eyes that cut like glass. "We're hanging out with Jon, Patty-baby. He's gonna let us sleep in his trailer tonight. He sang and played guitar on the big stage. Isn't that cool?" She crouches down and hisses right in Patricia's ear. "He's *famous*, Pat. Don't you dare talk about Aaron in front of him. Unless you wanna sleep in mud." Ma stands up and grabs Jon's hand, smiling up at him like they just got married.

Patricia's heart sinks. She liked Aaron. He was really nice. Not all of mom's boyfriends are. "Okay..."

Jon reaches down and ruffles her hair. "I'll let you sit on my shoulders, kid."

Patricia reads the man's face carefully. She likes his smile. He seems like he might be okay after all. Like he might feed her.

"Do you have food?" she asks. She knows Ma won't like it.

"Patricia!" Ma snaps. "Don't ask him that. Sorry, Jon, she's got no filter."

Jon gives Ma a look like she said something stupid. Glances back at Patricia, looking at her the same way the red-haired lady did. "Yeah,

kid. There's a food shortage out here but we've got snacks stocked up in the trailer. You like muffins?"

Patricia lights up. She'd eat anything at this point. "Please?"

He bends over, hands on his knees. "Let's get you cleaned up and you can have muffins for supper. Sound good, kid?"

"Yes!" Patricia's arms fly up with a squeal.

Jon high fives her. Beckons to her and Ma and they follow him through the rainslick grass to his trailer. Dreamcatcher hanging from the rearview mirror.

In his teeny home, Ma wipes Patricia down with a wet towel and she eats big blueberry muffins until she passes out in the top bed-bunk. It smells like Jon. Like sugary, wet smoke. She doesn't mind it now. The night air is cool on her skin. Belly full, smile on her face, safe and sweet inside. Drifting. Floating towards deep, warm dreams. Down, down, down into endless darkness.

Her eyes snap open when she hears slurping. Smacking. Distant melodies humming through the vehicle.

She glances below at the cramped kitchen table and sees Ma kissing Jon in the seat, tongues sliding, their profiles facing her in dim candlelight. He's tightening a black belt around her bicep, and the skin there is going pale and puffy.

Patricia gets a sick feeling in her heart. Her head. Her tummy. All over.

"A little tighter," Ma whispers. "Yes. *Perfect.*"

Jon raises a needle, flicks the glass with his middle finger. Patricia's breath goes shallow.

She hates this part.

Patricia inches away and her foot smacks against the trailer wall with a thud. Ma and Jon both look up, startled. She squeezes her eyes shut. Doesn't move. Doesn't breathe.

“She asleep?” Jon asks.

“She’s fine. Sleeps like a log, just moves around a lot.”

Every muscle in Patricia’s body is coiled up. She doesn’t know how long she stays there like that. Stiff, dumb and blind. But she hears everything. The small, happy sigh from Ma’s mouth. Shuffling of fabric. The clink of a lighter flaring. Murmurs and soft laughter. Quiet moans.

She peeks again and Jon’s hand is exploring under Ma’s dress like he’s searching for rare treasure. Patricia’s body flushes warm. She’s seen Ma get touched there. Everywhere. Seen her naked with boyfriends, moving up and down. It always makes her feel embarrassed, hot-cheeked and scared she’ll get caught watching. Something secret and special about it. And *gross*.

Then Ma wraps up Jon’s arm and this time Patricia watches the needle disappear.

She shuts her eyes again and fakes sleep, heart hammering in her tiny body. A frenzied hummingbird. Eventually she feels Ma and Jon climb up into the bunk next to her and Ma holds her close. Kisses her forehead wet. Tells her she’s her precious little baby.

A dream-filled ocean eventually pulls her under but the waves are rocky and she wakes up alone and afraid.

*

July 20, 1987, Los Angeles.

Come Monday, Patricia’s sick as a dog, lying motionless on her couch. Burning under a threadbare blanket as she stares at a lone Frida Kahlo print on her bare, white wall. Painting of toes rising from psychadelic bathwater.

Her eyes close, dizzy.

She knows she caught the flu from Janice, who had been almost green when she came into work Sunday.

Bitch.

For some reason, she still hasn't gotten fired for taking time off work. Probably because she threw up in the office hallway this morning, right in front of Mr. Jones. Kind of hard to fake that.

Patricia's immune system probably hasn't been that great to begin with, what with the constant movement, lack of sleep, proper meals. She knew it would hit her eventually but there's always a part of her that loves running from rest.

Amy comes over with homemade chicken broth. An angel straight from above.

"Gosh, Pat, when was the last time you cleaned in here?" Amy eyes the mountain of dishes in the sink. She crosses the sparsely decorated room, sleek dark bob going sepia as she whips aside the white curtain and opens a window.

"I dunno, a week or two ago?" Patricia's eyes sting from sunlight but she appreciates the air on her hot skin. "Or three? Haven't been home much lately. And when I am, I just sleep or work on the zine."

And masturbate furiously.

"That's no way to live, hun," Amy chides, brown eyes warm with sympathy. "Surprised you haven't gotten sick sooner. You never stop."

Patricia has been close as can be with Amy since their days of rooming together while both attending UCLA. She's a fantastic friend. Reminds Patricia of a Disney princess. Sweet and kind and graceful as Patricia is hardened, sharp, and sultry. Complimentary opposites. One dark, one fair. One willowy like a supermodel, the other shaped like the ultimate 50's pin-up. One from a well-to-do family, the other from a home so broken she still can't find all the pieces.

Patricia loves Amy with all her heart but all she can think of right now is how on earth Billy and her ending up fucking. Amy's a gentle, cooing dove. A charming housewife trapped in the wrong decade. It's not like Amy to jump into bed with just any random guy. Not like her

at all. Amy goes for doctors and lawyers. It's Patricia that picks her men right out of the gutter.

Billy must have seduced her. Maybe his preferences are just anyone that can fill out that scarlet bra.

Patricia's stomach churns at the thought. Amy is so wrong for him. Billy needs someone who can match him in energy, in wildness, sexuality...

Why is she thinking like this? All possessive and weird. It's those damn bonding chemicals. Proves you should never sleep with someone you don't like. Also, she needs to tell Amy what happened or else she'll feel sicker than ever.

Amy grabs a chair from the tiny kitchen table nearby and sits down next to her. Pops a thermometer in Patricia's dry-lipped mouth.

"Amy, I have to tell you something," Patricia mumbles around the glass. Spits it out onto her blanket with a *pleh*.

Amy makes a face at the gooey thermometer. "What's that, hun?"

"Remember that blonde guy you slept with a week ago?"

"Of course." Amy's eyes go dreamy. A smile filled with memory on her lips.

Patricia gets another sharp stab of jealousy.

"Uh...yeah. About that..." Patricia digs for the right words. She's never been in this situation before. "I sorta had sex with him after you. Twice." She'll count the three times in a night as one.

Amy pauses. "Oh..."

"Yeah, I found this guy in that shitty dive bar I keep saying I'll stop going to. Slept with him. Found out the next morning it was the same dude. And then I dunno what happened but we did it again and now we're hanging out this week." Patricia winces, waiting to get scolded.

"What are the chances?" Amy adjusts Patricia's blankets, tucking her

in. Hand testing her hot forehead. "That's so strange."

"But I'm not going to fuck him again, we're just hanging out," Patricia says quickly.

Amy nods, face serene. Barely a reaction.

"Aren't you mad at me?"

"Why would I be?" Amy shrugs. "I had no intentions of seeing him again. He was a great lover but not my type. Don't think I was his either. He sort of just rolled over after he came and then I left." Her brows twitch together. "Don't even remember his name."

Very different from the treatment Patricia received. He was holding her all night, mumbling dopey post-coital nonsense in her ear. She had to tell him to shut the fuck up so she could get some sleep. An explosion of delight in her at the thought of being different. Special. She pushes it away. Doesn't like the manic butterflies rising in her belly.

"He's an asshole," Patricia assures to herself more than anyone else.

"Why are you still seeing him then?" Amy asks, gaze ever-soft. "A bit soon after the breakup don't you think?"

"I dunno," Patricia's tone goes guilty. "He's in Cat's Eye and I thought I'd interview him. They're a really great band."

"Never heard."

"They're like Slayer if they had a baby with Motley Crue and T.Rex."

"Never heard."

Amy's more of the Madonna type.

"It doesn't matter," Patricia says. "Honestly, he asked me out and I went along with it because I'm a dumb slut that got distracted by a nice dick." She eyes Amy, waiting for her response with a playful grin.

Amy hits her arm, scoffing. “*Patricia*. Don’t say that about yourself.”

“I know I am one but only I’m allowed to say it,” Patricia laughs, trying to sit up. Gets dizzy and has to lie back. “Them’s the rules in these parts.”

Amy hands her a glass of water from the sofa’s side-table. “You’re not a slut, Pat. You just enjoy sex like any women should.”

Patricia sips. Avoids telling Amy she got fucked raw in a dirty backstage bathroom by the same scumbag drummer that was inside both of them the weekend before. God, just thinking about it makes her want to hurl.

“But I’m still dumb?” Patricia teases through her regret.

Amy is still taking this seriously. Eyes big. “Of course you’re not.”

“Thank you, babe.”

“Though if you don’t clean in here soon, you’re going to get eaten alive by rats in your sleep. And that would be pretty dumb.”

“Excellent point,” Patricia hands the glass back.

“You know what your real problem is?”

“It’s getting hard to keep track these days.”

“It’s this zine thing. Have you thought of hiring someone to help you out? You’re running yourself into the ground.”

“Hiring someone?” Patricia goes fiery with defensiveness. Can’t stand input. “Amy, it’s a zine. And who would I hire? And with what money? I barely cover the cost of making the damn thing and I get half of it made for free at the office. Partly the reason I work in that hellhole.”

Amy gives her a serious stare, zeroing into her. “I can give you the money.”

Amy has a high paying job as a paralegal assistant and a trust fund

the size of California. Is constantly offering to help out with Patricia's finances. Patricia regularly turns her down.

"No, it's okay. I'll figure it out."

"Hun, do you think all the greats could have made it without some help?"

This pep-talk is already giving her a headache. Well, adding to it. "I'm not great, Amy. I write a zine."

"Patricia, this isn't a xeroxed pamphlet. It's high quality stuff and you know it. You're doing the work of three people. Probably more. At least ask some other people to help volunteer?"

Patricia just shrugs, biting the inside of her cheek. "I work better alone."

"Okay. I know you won't budge without a fight. But just know that I'm here to help. No strings attached."

"It's *fine*." End of story. Case closed. She tries to soften it. "Thanks for coming here though, Amy. Seriously. I really appreciate it."

Amy doesn't push. Gently touches her arm. "No problem, Pat, my love."

There's a long moment of silence before Amy looks suddenly excited, like she's about to burst. It's confusing.

"What is it?" Patricia asks. "What happened?"

Amy makes a joyful squealing sound. "Okay, I can't take it anymore." She extends her slender hand out, palm-down. For some reason it's only now that Patricia notices the giant, glittering diamond dwarfing her index finger. "I was going to wait til when you weren't sick but I'm just too excited."

"What!" Patricia's eyes are saucers. "But I thought-

"I changed my mind. We made up a few days ago and he proposed." Amy's smile is so wide it's threatening to crack her face. "Oh Pat, it

was so beautiful. There was a bed of roses and everything. I love him so much.”

Scott has been on and off with Amy for years. A rich, handsome doctor. Picture perfect. Patricia doesn't think much of him. He has zero substance. Nothing stimulating about him whatsoever. Then again, maybe boring is what Patricia's missing in her life.

“Aw, Amy. I'm really happy for you.” Patricia knows how much this means to her. Amy's been planning her wedding day since birth. She deserves it. Although, maybe with someone more interesting than Scott. “So when's the day?”

“We're thinking late September?”

Patricia tries not to show any expression. “So soon?”

“We just know it's time,” Amy says earnestly. “We've already put this off for too long.”

“Yes, of course. Wow.” No wonder why she was so over Billy. She got whisked away. “I'm speechless.”

“I know. It's so exciting!” Amy's the definition of starry-eyed right now. Multicoloured-hearts bubbling out of her eye sockets. Smitten.

Patricia's not going to fuck with that. “Yes...totally.”

“There's more,” Amy continues, “I'm throwing a bachelorette party next month....in Vegas!”

There's no way. Patricia must be dreaming.

“Vegas?” she sputters, room spinning and not from the fever. “*You?* In Vegas?”

“I know.” Amy clings to her arm. “Don't worry, I'll pay for everything. Just please, please, please come.”

“I just...it doesn't seem like something you'd do?”

“I never go full-on crazy like you, Pat.” Amy sighs. “I wanna do

something wild before the wedding. We'll have so much fun together, hun. Can't you see us? Partying and gambling and just going all out?"

Actually, she can't at all. This is beyond surreal. "Okay, well, hopefully I can book the time off. I'm kinda in dire straits at work right now." Maybe she'll have to pull out those fishnets again. Is that what saved her before?

Amy gives her glistening Bambi-eyes. "But...I'm sure they'll understand."

"We'll see." Patricia watches Amy's lips make the saddest pout. "I mean, it'll be fine. Of course, it'll be fine. I'll pull some strings."

Her eyes light up again. "I just cannot wait!"

"Me neither..."

The truth is Patricia's pure tumult inside. Las Vegas has unpleasant significance for her. Ma took her there once as a kid with one of her boyfriends and Patricia had to watch her go on a week-long drug binge. Then Ma moved out there five years ago and they've only talked a couple times ever since. It's not exactly full of good associations.

She can't bear to tell Amy that though.

Amy keeps chatting, radiating, frothing over. Patricia just nods with a tight smile. On automatic pilot, staring suspiciously at Amy's goliath of a ring.

*

Friday evening arrives in red-hot glory. Summer sunlight still glowing, fading.

Thanks to Amy's magic broth, Patricia's fully recovered, standing in front of the open fridge when she hears a loud honk from outside her window. She heard the growl of an engine before that. Eight o'clock on the dot. She peeks past her curtains to see the sleek lines of a dark blue Camaro against the sidewalk curb. Her eyebrows raise. *Nice ride*

.

Patricia watches Billy step out of the vehicle. She nearly chokes when she skims over his black t-shirt and blue jeans. Snug as hell. Simple yet devastating. And from the strut in his step, he's highly aware of that. He saunters round the car to lean against the passenger door with a cigarette dangling between his lips. Aviators flashing as he takes a drag. Oozing sex and smoke.

No big deal. It's not like she's a slob tonight either.

Okay, so this isn't a date. But that doesn't mean she shouldn't dress nice, right? Big gold hoops in her ears. Precariously short cut-off jeans. A revealing bubblegum pink shirt that clings to her just right. Pink lipstick that brings out her natural blush. Fresh coat of pink nail polish on her fingers, on her toes peeking coyly through her sandals.

She's decided that the choice of color has nothing to do with Billy noticing it on her last time. She made that decision all by herself, would have worn it anyways. No doubt about it.

When she's out the door and approaching his car, he takes off his shades, feline eyes eating her up with zero shame. "Damn, you look good."

Patricia offers him cool indifference. "I see you're wearing a shirt today."

Smoke streams from Billy's grinning mouth. Lone silver earring reflecting light. "I like to keep it classy." He opens the door for her, and it makes her uneasy as hell. Already this is too date-like.

When they're both in the car, Patricia realizes she may have bitten off more than she can chew. Being in such a confined space with him is a death wish. On multiple levels.

The air is soup-thick inside. Burning her. Filled with the scent of leather and tobacco and whatever delicious cologne Billy's chosen to torture her with tonight. The skin of her bare legs sticks to the seat. She looks at the muscles under his thin, tight shirt and breaks a sweat all over. Isn't sure where the heat is coming from at this point. Hitting her from all angles, inside out.

“Holy shit , it’s hot in here,” she moans.

A scalding stare travels up and down her. “I’ll say.”

She won’t acknowledge that. This car needs to move so she can get air. She’s dying. “So where are we doing this?” she asks. Perspiration tickling her lower spine, the back of her neck.

“*My place?*” he hums, glazed with icing sugar.

“Nuh-uh.” Patricia gives him a stern shake of her head. “Remember our arrangement? Interview only.”

“Chill, sweetheart. I didn’t forget.” He pulls at the last of his cigarette, flicks the yellow stub out the open window. “Thought we’d go out to the Santa Monica pier. Walk around. Check out the big ferris wheel or whatever.” Ice-blue eyes glint at her. “Very public place. Very safe. One wrong move and I’ll get beaten to death with cotton candy.”

Patricia gives a short laugh, lightly smacking his arm with the back of her hand. “Sounds great.” And it’s by the water, thank god.

Billy glances down where her knuckles hit him. Lethal smile peeking. “Would you look at that. Less than five minutes in and you can’t keep your hands off me.”

She should’ve known he wouldn’t let her get away with *breathing* near him, let alone the slightest touch. She leans towards the door, grimacing. “As if.”

“Just sayin’. Tonight’s already going off the rails with all your pawing and I’m feeling vulnerable.”

A real wiseguy. “Yeah yeah, you’re fucking hysterical. Can we go now?”

There’s no going. Just more of his sickly-sweet grin. “Keep this up and I’m gonna have to ask you to get in the backseat.” He leans against his chair, gives her a provocative once-over. “That’s where bad girls go when they’ve been naughty.”

She has to wrestle away the steamy montage that fires through her brain at that suggestion. And the curiosity about how much pussy he's ploughed in this car.

"For the love of god, man." She flails a hand towards the road. A bead of sweat drips between her breasts, nestling warm in her bellybutton. "Hit the gas so we can get some some kind of breeze going. It's a fucking furnace in here."

Billy ignores her. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll keep you company. Gets real lonely back there." He looks over his shoulder. "And I gotta say, the leather's not that comfy either. Not in the summer. Gets all sticky and hot. Makes a squeaking sound when skin rubs against it..." A hand snakes behind her headrest. His gaze catches the wet trail down her cleavage, flickers back up to her mouth. "I've got something else you can sit on that'll feel way better."

She's going to kill him.

"How thoughtful," Patricia violently clicks her seatbelt on. "Now *drive* before I make the zine cover say you're a shitty drummer with a little dick."

He makes a face of mock offense. Fades into a rumbling chuckle. "*Me-ow*. Is this the fucking Opposite Day issue or are you always this bitchy?"

Her eyes blaze blue murder. "Are you always this much of a perverted asshole?"

"I was thinking more loveable scoundrel."

Patricia taps her forefinger insistently against his side of the dashboard. "Less thinking, Pepe Le Pew. More driving."

"*Oooh*, hurt me, baby." Billy guns the engine. Never-ending smirk sealed on as he checks her out again. "Love how mouthy you get. Wouldn't be Trish otherwise, would you?"

They take off towards the Pacific Ocean and the cool breeze hitting her flesh doesn't help the heat one bit.

5. true blue

They shoot towards Santa Monica through burnt-orange sun. Buildings and palm trees and perfectly shaped fluffy clouds blurring past. Patricia soon realizes that Billy lives close to the pier. They're going to be in his backyard. Spitting distance.

Her sharp words must have worked too because he keeps a lid on his filthy mouth. He's playing nice. Making small talk about the blistering weather, the drive out here, his carpentry job that pays the bills. He even lets her have dibs on the music. Motioning towards the glove box that she opens with a curious click.

The roll of condoms almost explodes in her face. Accordion-ing out of the compartment with a golden shine. There's single foils as well, shimmering colours scattered like candy wrappers.

"Well, well, well. Aren't you just the *most* prepared?"

Billy doesn't look the slightest bit sheepish, swerving around a tight corner. "Safety first."

Except for last weekend apparently. And the weekend before that. Shit, she should get tested. Who knows what he's crawling with.

"No kidding. You've got more rubbers than a condom factory, man." She paws through the foil to find tapes of Metallica, Slayer, random African drumming samples, and oddly enough Duran Duran. A sparse collection. She tucks stray blonde hair behind her ear, squinting. "What else do you keep in here? Lube? Dildos? Where are the fucking cassettes?"

Relaxed shoulders give a vague shrug. "You asked where the music was, sweetheart."

"Those are all the tapes you have?" Patricia checks the compartment inside the passenger door. Searching fingers find a silky pair of leopard-print panties.

She exhales a laugh though she's not sure if it's sardonic or just sad.

Could he *be* more of a skank?

"These yours?" She dangles tacky animal print in front of her. Stretches the waistband. "Very nice."

Billy glances, brows perking up behind his shades. He shakes his head with a throaty chuckle. "I seriously had no idea those were there." He points near her legs. "There's more cassettes under the seat though."

"It's okay, dude. We both know you get around." She shoves the panties back where she found them. Hopes the disappointment isn't clear in her voice, mentally adding another point to the *why you shouldn't touch him* list.

Patricia plucks out the Metallica tape. *Master of Puppets*. Doesn't check under her seat for alternatives in case she finds a strap-on or something. She hands the cassette over. Billy pops it into the deck and the sound-system thrums electric wails right through her bloodstream.

*

Magic hour at the Santa Monica Pier. Ocean horizon lit up like a jewel. People of all ages bustle as the sun emits it's last sparkling rays. A bright red ferris wheel rotates in the distance. Wooden rollercoaster lifting teenagers to high-heaven before plummeting their screaming bodies below. Pretzels, hot dogs and candy apples waft on the salt breeze as speakers feed bubblegum-pop to the crowd. It all fills Patricia with a youthful buoyancy she hasn't felt in a long time. She has to admit, this was a good choice on Billy's part. She needed a break from her routine of work-home-club, work-home-club.

They stroll the wooden boardwalk together, taking in technicolor sights and sounds. Skin cooling from the zephyr. Temperature far more manageable. Patricia rummages through her bag for her tape recorder as she keeps an arm's length between them. He waits patiently, quietly. Still hasn't made any moves on her since she snapped at him in the car, though she anticipates a sly comment any second.

"So let's start out simple." She stretches the recorder towards

him. "Where ya from, Billy-boy?"

"Originally San Diego. But I've lived all over California since I was thirteen."

"How old are you?" That question's more to sate her curiosity than for the interview.

"Twenty-six. You?"

"Twenty-five." Patricia dodges a shrieking kid on a scooter. "And what brought you out to L.A?"

"Went to high-school out here. Moved around a lot after. Then I guess the music led me back this time around."

Patricia wonders what Billy was like as a teenager. There's something about him that seems both young and old. Straddling the line of boyhood and adulthood, never quite fully going into either. An experienced solidity that makes her want to sit on his shoulders, like she did with Aaron at Woodstock so long ago. A vulgar immaturity that makes her want to wash his mouth out with soap. A nebulous edge.

She comes to the conclusion that teenage Billy was a smarmy little shithead. "So you know the area."

"Yup." Billy nods, chest puffing. "I know California like the back of my hand."

"And how did you get into drums?"

"Band class in middle-school. Started with the triangle and worked my way up."

Patricia laughs at that ridiculous image, resisting the urge to elbow him. "Bet you beat the shit out of that triangle."

"You bet your ass I did," Billy grins. "Had to show Ms. Hooper I didn't come to fuck around." He pauses. "Much."

"Biggest musical influences?"

He blows out a big gust of air. "That's tough. Could be talkin' for days. Today I'll pick..." He gazes out at the water. "Sabbath. Stones. Metallica. Art Blakely. The basics."

"Throwing some jazz on me at the end there?" She remembers Aaron's Miles Davis albums that he'd force her to listen to. John Coltrane. Chick Corea. Blakely was in the mix.

"That's Ms. Hooper's fault. Shoved jazz drum-patterns down my throat til I could do em' in my sleep. Hated her for it. I'm grateful now."

"Explains your style. Intricate."

"Is it?" Billy plays coy. Fishing. She can see in his eyes he's very conscious of his skills. Honed them painstakingly. Practiced until skin peeled off cramped fingers and his sticks were hitting blood. You don't get that good without hurting.

She'll take the bait. "Well, you hit hard as fuck. But then you're doing all this subtle timing stuff that most people wouldn't notice. Not on the Strip anyways. Over their heads."

"But *you* noticed." He sounds pleased.

"Guess I did." She should tell him what she really thinks of his abilities on the skins. Actually, it's practically bursting out her mouth. "I have to confess," She hovers the recorder under her chin. "You're honestly one of the best drummers I've ever seen."

Billy looks like she just handed him a million dollars. Mouth parted for a second before he beams pearly-white. "Really?"

"You kind of blow my mind," she blurts. Far more honest than she anticipated. Diamond eyes gleam at her, like he wants to reach out and hug her tight. She keeps her distance. "Don't let it get to your head now. Though I'm not sure if it could swell any more."

"Too late. I'm gonna float right outta here." Billy stops in front of a games stand. Swimming ducks to shoot. Looks fun. Patricia clicks off her tape recorder and slips the attendant a crisp bill. "Now that we're confessing. Dave showed me Live Wire yesterday and I gotta say..."

I'm pretty damn impressed. Did you actually make it all by yourself?"

Patricia grabs a gun off the rack, a bit miffed at that last question but flattered he likes her work.

"Yeah. Why?" Her eyes narrow down the barrel.

His arms fold as he leans against the frame of the stand, watching her aim. "I wouldn't really call it a *zine*. Looks like a plain ol' magazine to me. It's like thirty pages long and the pages are glossy. Colored too."

"I don't know what else to call it." She shoots a lime-green duck between the eyes. "It's a do-it-yourself labor of love that makes zero money and takes all my time. I make most of it at my day job. Which *also* takes all my time." Yellow plastic goes down hard in punctuation.

"Nice shot." Billy gawks. She misses the next mallard. "Can't believe you interviewed Nikki Sixx. And Def Leppard."

"You must have only read one issue. There's been way more than that." Patricia nails five bobbing ducks in quick succession. "And as for Nikki, Motley Crue lives here. Piece of cake to hunt those degenerates down. You'll run into them soon enough." A bell rings and a magenta teddybear with a crimson-heart belly gets placed in her hand. She gives Billy a cocky shrug. "Nikki's a dog though. Never again."

"Well, lookit you. You're gonna float on outta here with me, Trish," Billy teases. Lip biting like he'd love for them to do just that. "You *should* let it get to your head though. Live Wire's really fucking good. Kinda weird that I'm gonna be in it. Never been in anything like that before."

Her soul soars. Sings from his praise. Somehow it means everything.

She pushes the bear against his firm chest. "Guess it's your lucky day."

Billy takes the stuffed animal in his palm, scanning Patricia in one appreciative swoop. "A hundred percent."

It's not long before she's laughing til her stomach cramps, almost losing her tape recorder in the process. Billy's telling tales of the saucy dance moves Dave would pull onstage back when they played in a death metal band together. Revealing how they bonded over Supertramp and a love for bad kung-fu movies. There's that boyish exuberance in his smile now, in the cadence of his voice. It gets under her skin. Seems to match the playful laps of the ocean beyond the pier. The beat of her heart.

Patricia smothers the feeling dead. Jumps on the corpse. Too wise to let it live and breathe.

They pass the rust-coloured brick of a burger joint and Patricia takes a few polaroids of Billy leaning against the outside wall. They're great shots. Last rays of citrus sunset are hitting him at the perfect angle. Wavy locks looking sex-swept. Blue stare glittering. Effortless heat. A shining star lit up for all to see. She anticipates a frenzy when these feature in next month's issue. The Sunset Strip is going to go nuts for him. Panties will be thrown.

She needs to distract herself.

"Let's get ice-cream." She motions nearby to a ruby-red stand striped with white. Billy nods in agreement.

Patricia slants against the counter next to the popcorn machine. She flags down a gum-smacking girl reading Harlequin trash in the back. A golden stud clutching a blonde damsel on the cover. "True Blue" blasts at an embarrassing level from the loudspeakers and Patricia blushes bright as cotton candy. Looking at anything except Billy's gaze. She can't make direct eye contact with him in the context of cheesy pop music. He clashes too beautifully.

"What kind do you want?" Billy reaches into his wallet just as Madonna croons *true blue, baby, I love you*.

Patricia goes twitchy. "This isn't a date, remember?"

Pale eyes roll towards the darkening sky. "It's fucking ice-cream, Trish. Not a ring."

“Fine.” Did he have to mention a ring? “But nothing else, alright?”

Two cones get swirled up cold and tall. Strawberry for her. Chocolate for him. Billy eats his with efficient speed between questions. Patricia nurses hers and it begins to melt in the warm summer air. She laps at the drips. He stares as pink cream runs over her fingers and she slurps it off.

“You seriously don’t know how to eat ice cream?”

“There’s nothing to know,” Patricia frowns, absently licking excess sweetness from her lips. Billy’s eyes follow the motion.

“I know you gotta eat the damn thing before it melts.” He steals the cone from her, the flat of his tongue sweeping the dribbling edge wet and clean.

“Ew.” Her grimace deepens. “Thanks for drooling all over it.”

“Don’t tell me you’re worried about cooties now,” he goads. “Pretty sure I’ve licked your tonsils.”

“*Eww.*” Patricia has a cartoon-like vision of pushing him off the pier. He’d flail before hitting the water with mile-high splash.

Billy just laughs, enjoying her disgust. She can’t help but join him. If he keeps making her giggle like this, she might split apart.

The sky goes pitch-black and the pier is even more vibrant. Thousands of lights and flashing signs beam louder than ever. Billy points to the slow twirl of the ferris wheel. “Wanna go for a ride?”

Minutes later they’re settling in a metal booth. Patricia’s giddy. Hasn’t been in one of these since she was a teenager. Though when the attendant locks them in she realizes this might be more cozy than she bargained for. Billy’s body heat radiates into her, the teddy bear she won sitting between them. It’s not enough to bar the prickle of not-touching, of auras grazing. Fire licks between her legs. Makes her want to inch them apart.

She seals her thighs shut. None of that. No floating into fantasy. No touching. Nothing.

The wheel loads couple by couple and soon they're at the top. Getting an excellent view of the crowd, the stars, the rising full moon. It's dazzling. She glances to the sleek lap of the ocean and her heart aches.

"I haven't been near the water for like....three months," she murmurs. She never realized until tonight just how much she's isolated herself. Nose to the grindstone but no fun or beauty. Drained bloodless.

"Really?" Billy's brows raise high. "You need to get the fuck out of Hollywood, Trish. I have to see water from my window daily or I'll die."

"But I'm so close to the Strip. Walking distance."

"Yeah, but you have to be surrounded by assholes all day."

"I'm also close to my job." Now she's convincing herself. Her voice sounds flat.

"You like your job?"

"Hate it with every fibre of my being, but life isn't fair, is it?"

Billy goes quiet. "No, it's not." He sends her a look that could only be described as longing. "Definitely not."

"I can't believe I don't come here all the time." She marvels at the kaleidoscope of color on the water.

"You should move near the ocean some day soon. It's good for you. I can tell." The wheel begins to turn. The ride officially starts.

She spots some surfers catching night-time waves. She'd never have the guts to do that only by moonlight. Billy's looking too. Pensive. A little detached. She can sense that he's also putting up a wall. That he's been doing it all evening. Kept on a tight, straining leash. Good boy.

"You ever surf?" Patricia asks.

He chuckles. "Are you fucking kidding? I was *raised* in the water."

“Any good though?” She can’t stop herself from teasing.

“Come surfing with me and I’ll let you decide.” He offers her a dry grin. “You’ve surfed, right?”

“Yeah, a bit. Some classmates used to drag me out when I went to UCLA. I’m mediocre at best.” She smiles. “Maybe just plain bad.”

“You just need to do it more often. Takes awhile.”

“How often do you surf?”

“During the summer?” He stares at the black tide. “On a good week, every morning.”

“Really?” She imagines him riding a cresting wave, bronze skin glistening. Fingers skimming crystal-blue water. “Cool.”

“It’s getting harder in-between the band and the carpentry gig but if I don’t, I start to get antsy. Especially seeing the waves from my place.”

She never noticed he had a view. Closed blinds and a frantic scramble to leave blocking her last time.

“You feel at peace in the water.” An easy guess.

“Yup. Right back in the womb.”

“And drumming?”

He looks to the silvery moon before glancing back at her. “Total freedom.”

There’s a moment of taking each other in. Billy looks unreal in the dark. Eyes glowing turquoise, reflecting neon. Full moon pinned near the corner of his head. Stars and distant planets a sparkling backdrop, framing him like a work of fine art. A celestial masterpiece. Creature of the sultry night.

Fuck, this is bad. Very, very bad. She is in extremely dangerous territory. So silly, so naive, thinking that she wouldn’t be ensnared by

his nearness, the atmosphere. The music and the sea. Her own primal urges. Chastity pact dangled to the wind.

Friends. Just friends. Friends, friends, friends.

Then to her dismay, a familiar song starts. Loud and crisp. The trill of flutes deafening. *Can you hear the drums, Fernando?*

Patricia's gone dry-mouthed. Doesn't know whether to scream with laughter or throw herself off the wheel. She tears her sight away from him. Looks up. Looks down. Looks wide and far across the pier without seeing anything, praying the night veils her humiliation.

I remember long ago and on a starry night like this

The wheel keeps turning and there's no exit she can run to. Round and round they go. Trapped in a school girl's wet dream. An endless wait for the chorus.

There was something in the air that night, the stars were bright, Fernando

She finally takes a peek and Billy's grinning at her turmoil. Sees everything. Iridescent blues twinkling.

They were shining there for you and me, for liberty, Fernando

Butterflies flutter inside, dance wildly in every cell. Patricia shifts in her seat and her fingers accidentally brush against his. She can't seem to move her hand away. It's like she's getting sucked into him. A magnetic pull. Nerves tingling.

Though we never thought that we could lose, there's no regret

Billy slowly loops his forefinger around hers and it sparks her to the marrow. Otherworldly gaze meeting hers. Asking for more. Before she knows it, she's twining her fingers through his in response. Their palms meet warm and electrifying and a satisfied thrill rushes through her. It's like she's thirteen years old again. Except thirteen year old Patricia was never this overwhelmed by hand-holding.

If I had to do the same again, I would my friend, Fernando

Soon the ride ends and the seats shift down, one by one, couples exiting. The music continues, heart still drumming a violent beat in her chest. Billy's closing in. Lush mouth hovering near hers. Bedroom eyes beckoning. Irresistible.

She's soaking wet. Melted into her seat like sorbet in the summer sun. Finished by pretty lashes. By heat and moon-glow and a song about a magical, starlit night.

A droning voice slices through the fantasy. Bored attendant looming over them. "That's enough now, lovebirds. I've got a whole wheel to unload here. Beat it." Patricia rips her hand away, jolted out of the moment. Like scissors cutting a strip of film. Snip. End scene.

She flies out of the seat, putting as much distance between her and Billy as possible.

"I should be heading back," she says. Short of breath. Legs already walking.

"Okay." He keeps a step behind her, looking dreamy still, eyes shot with want. Leash loosened. Hypnotized by the shadows, by lovesick music. Drunk with it.

Sure enough, the next lyric she hears is a swooning *give a little bit, give a little bit of your love to me*

Apparently the universe has a conniving plan to fuck with her tonight. Always did have a twisted sense of humour.

See the man with the lonely eyes, take his hand, you'll be surprised

Her steps quicken, nearly speed-walking towards Billy's car. Escaping the soundtrack, running from the magic. Tension between them gets more unbearable by the second as he follows after her. Desire piercing, stinging. An unspoken awareness that builds and builds. Darkness seems to bring it out worse than ever. Transforming the pier into a nightmarish landscape, fluorescent colors going sinister. Music now ominous. Ghouls cackling around every corner. Temptation swiping at her ankles with a hiss.

Take it.

Billy's hunger calls out to her like a wolf's howl. Baying for flesh. Makes her blood throb, burn, vibrating with it. She can taste how much he craves her. Sharp, hot and smoky-sweet. She wants to let him sink his fangs deep, make her howl back. He'd rip her wide open. Eat her alive under the moon's rays, cold and white on scorched skin. She'd burst in his ravenous jaws like ripe fruit. Drip warm nectar down his throat, tart and slippery...

No.

The illusion explodes into shattered glass. She mentally slaps her wrist red. Bad Patricia. She promised she wouldn't fuck up again. That she wouldn't hate herself come morning. She keeps a clipping pace. Ice in her veins. Winter chill to contrast the balmy evening. The Camaro's now in sight, gleaming blue-black under a streetlamp.

"Jesus, Trish. Slow down." Billy's been taking long strides to keep up with her. "What's the fuckin' hurry?"

"I need to go home." She rushes towards the car. Stands in front of the passenger door, waiting for him to unlock it. "I've got stuff to do." Like eating everything in her fridge and jerking off to cable porn until she passes out. If she did drugs she'd take them all. Must numb. Must numb.

"I'll get you there, don't worry." Gentle caution in his voice, like she's some scared stray with her claws out. He gets in the drivers seat, tossing the stuffed bear in the back, leans over to unlock the door. She gets in.

Well, it's sure not any better in here. She's immediately swallowed up by tobacco and leather and the cologne that's quickly becoming her kryptonite. Billy takes up the whole damn car. He's all over her, no contact necessary. She sinks into her seat, eyes closing to get away. He starts the engine and the floor rumbles under her pink-painted toes.

He turns the radio on to some thrash metal station and it's a relief. Hard and gruesome. Mean snarls calling upon angels of death. No words of hot love there. Though the pounding bass seems to go right to her clit.

This is fucking ridiculous. She squeezes her legs tight together. Keeps imagining ice water. Cold lakes. Glaciers. Billy rubbing an ice-cube all over her sweaty, naked-

No. Bad. Another slap on the wrist. Patricia glances over at the source of her madness.

He seems just fine, peachy, no longer a ferocious beast. Cool as the evening breeze. Just driving her home. Just another night. Just a man and his Camaro.

Her eyes linger on him, mind wandering. She ponders how his car seems inseparable from him, a metallic extension of his body. Muscular, smooth lines and the constant element of danger, of excitement. Something poetic about it. Beautiful.

He lights his cigarette and transforms into a brooding James Dean. She's become Natalie Wood, a whimsical girl on the ride of her life. The open road taking them somewhere wild and free. He'll drive her to a starry lookout point and they'll stare at constellations in each others arms-

Did he drug her? Something's wrong with her.

She grabs her delirium by the ankles and yanks it down into ugly reality. Buries it in the dirt. No more floating. Billy goes back to being Billy, the sleazeball that fucks anything with a pulse. And she's just Patricia, the horny idiot who should know better by now.

"You okay?" Billy interrupts her churning paranoia.

"Huh?"

"You've been staring at me for like five minutes straight." And it seriously must have been minutes. His cigarette's burned down to the stub. He flicks it out the window.

Weird. Creepy of her. Patricia jerks her head towards the road. "I was looking past you." A lame cover up.

A smug smile. Ego appeased. "So, did you have fun tonight?"

“Um...” Maybe a little too much. “Sure.”

“Seemed like you needed that.”

“Maybe.” She won’t admit he’s right. And even if he is, how presumptuous. “Did you have fun?”

“Not much more I could ask for. Sunset on the water. Ice-cream. Talked music with this beautiful girl for hours. Man, she’s gorgeous. Total fox.” He gives her a quick scan, wise smirk on his face. “Almost let me kiss her too.”

There goes the leash. Gone.

He turns back to the road with an innocent shrug. “Okay, there might be a bit more I could ask for, but I’ll stop there.”

She doesn’t say anything in return. Silence permeates. They’re close to her apartment now, approaching the curb in front. Billy takes another smoke from the pack on the dashboard, turns up the volume on the metal like it’ll cover the void, the tension. Lights the cigarette without a word. A little rough. Zippo lighter snapping shut with a metallic clang.

He takes a few deep drags, arm behind her seat as he parallel parks, looking through the back window. Cigarette dangling. Burning ash falls to his jeans and Patricia instinctively brushes it off. His whole body twitches. And her hand just...stays there.

He parks the car and quickly turns off the radio. Looks her over. Assessing the situation. Her palm is steady on his knee. She can’t let go. Glued there, gone into a trance. In fact, her hand is gliding up, fingers smoothing over the muscle of his inner thigh. Stroking. Whoopsie-daisy.

He puts his hand over hers. Warm. “Friends don’t do that, Trish.”

She makes a move to pull back but Billy holds her tight. Won’t let her go that easy. He lifts her hand slowly to his mouth. Kisses her fingers. Her open palm. The delicate skin of her wrist. Takes his time in the process, looking straight into her eyes. It’s absolutely electric. Floods her with pleasure all the way up her arm, down her spine to her

curling toes.

“Friends don’t do that either,” she says weakly.

“Face it, Trish. We’re never gonna just be friends.” He strokes the stubble of his cheek against the flat of her palm. A deep need in his stare, insatiable. He tastes her lips with his gaze. “Want you too damn much.” He kisses her fingers again.

She stiffens up. Remembers the promise to herself. The leopard-print underwear, the overflowing condoms, the girls lining up to get fucked backstage. Her tender heart, still bleeding.

It takes all her will to tear her hand away. “Goodnight, Billy. See you around.”

Patricia springs out the car quick as a cat. Slams the door shut, rushing towards her apartment. She glances back and the Camaro shines blackish in the moonlight. Calling her name. She can feel Billy’s stare through the shadowed window.

He doesn’t leave until she’s inside the building. She stands in the dimly-lit foyer, heart racing. Watching through the glass as he backs up before barrelling down the street.

She stays there until he’s a fading dot, returning to the ocean blue.

6. rose red

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys. Thanks for all your lovely comments. They keep me going!

Explicit drug use ahead here.

Enjoy!

Patricia is running. Black woods surround her, lit only by moonbeam and ethereal flora.

The forest floor is cool, rich and deep. Her bare feet move across the ground in slow motion, each step a damp caress. Fireflies guide the way in orbs of pink-gold while the scent of jasmine and honeysuckle fill her to the brim. A hint of magnolia at the base.

Her dress is sheer lavender silk. Clumsy. Weighing her down. Branches grab at her, snatching, fabric tearing.

She glances back behind her and sees him. A dark figure atop a looming cliff head, watching. A massive full moon highlighting him from behind, one hand holding a large black bow. He reaches behind his shadowy head. Draws an arrow and points straight through her. Fires. She dodges and the arrow hits a nearby oak tree. An explosion of red roses, flaring into crimson and gold sparks. Smouldering ash on the soil.

A second arrow fires, singes past her ear into more reddish bloom. Another glance and he's moving down the cliff, a few easy jumps over the rock. Features shadowed, only the brawn of his form visible. He lands on the earth in a graceful bound. Her heart gallops as his eyes catch the light. Eerie flash in the abyss.

He follows, trails her at a smooth, steady pace. No rush and yet he's catching up to her, space between them closing quickly. Her feet are moving fast as they can, but she's going nowhere. Grinding through thick fluid.

Another branch swipes and in one step she's naked. Milky-pale as the

moon above. Skin exposed to the chill, floral air. The ground is shifting, blooming into violets. Illuminated. They open up, tickle at her heels. Secret creatures giggle. Fireflies blink, shimmer over her sweet display of flesh.

An arrow hits her right between the shoulder blades and she gasps. Stops in her tracks, clutching at her chest. A ripple of pleasurable heat with a sting at the tail. Roses burst inside, and her tongue coats with the taste of amber honey.

The arrow dissolves. Disappears. A gust of wind pushes her backwards and she falls, slow, like the pour of molasses. Starlight twinkles above as her limbs do a languid dance through the air. Floating before she lands in a bed of magnolia blossoms, sugar-pink and soft as snow. She lays naked and still. Waiting. Breathing. Hears a long, fiery howl. Twigs crunching. Gruff, heavy panting echoing between the trees.

A wolf emerges from the pitch dark. Black fur glazed with lunar shine. Tongue sweeping over fangs. Each paw landing releases the perfume of crushed petals, circling before he slowly crawls over scented skin. She shuts her eyes as he settles his weight onto her. Doesn't move or fight. Too heavy, sinking into velvet down. Drugged on night flowers.

When her lashes part she meets the sparkle of winter-blue. Feels burning skin blanketing hers, bare and sweat-slick with chase. Golden hair brushes her cheek. Peppermint smoke on breath that crystallizes silver in the air, teeth gleaming. A wet-hot tongue drags up her throat, drawing out a shiver. Warm lips graze. Stopping at her earlobe with a low growl.

“Gotcha.”

Patricia jolts awake, drenched in a cold sweat, pulse thundering in her ears. Sprawled out on her living room couch, blanket kicked to the floor. Blurry eyes wince at the moon blinding white through her window. Peek at the flicker of the television screen. A documentary plays. Wolves of North America. Hunting and mating in deep wilderness.

She can't go back to sleep.

The next evening, Patricia sneaks inside her workplace after closing hours. Breaking in with the key she copied. Swiped the original off her bosses desk way back when.

The process of making the zine is comforting. Typing the articles out. Carefully slicing columns with a sharp exacto knife and waxing them onto lined templates. Rolling and pressing them tight to the page. Printing them out in silence, looking over her shoulder to make sure the janitor doesn't catch her. All in secret, alone. If she got caught, she absolutely would be fired. She's been doing this for over a year though. So far, so good.

It's all relatively simple until she has to print out the pictures of Billy. Sizzling star of the show. She tries not to examine too closely. Just like she had to numb herself when she played the tape back of their interview. She's never heard herself giggle that much before. Nor has she held her breath so long, goosebumps every time Billy uttered her name, teased her silly.

Gruelling. A test of strength.

On her way back she passes a twenty-four hour convenience store. Sees flower bouquets being sold out front under fluorescent lights. A whole wall of them and only one kind available. Red Roses. Scarlet petals flooding over the containers, stuffed to bursting. Sprinkled gingerly over pavement like a breadcrumb trail.

She buys a dozen. Comes home and cleans the kitchen to a spotless sheen. When she arranges the flowers in a glass vase on her dining-room table, the entire place comes to life. Suddenly feels like home sweet home. Patricia's never felt at home anywhere.

It's quarter to midnight when she gets a call. Rings echo through the shower as she soaps up her hair. Goes to voice message. Five minutes later she emerges from the steam, pink towel wrapped around her torso. Plants a foot on the edge of the couch to moisturize. Pours silky liquid into her hand and groans under her breath as she massages her calf. She's all knotted up. Her dry hand reaches over and presses play.

A husky voice soaks into her skin. Sinks deeper than oil ever could.

“Hey Trish, it’s Billy. I know it’s kinda late but I-uh, had a really great time last night and I wanna see you again. I get that you’re all...prickly about me, but thought I’d give it a shot anyway, ‘cause, hey, what do I got to lose? Dignity left the building a long time ago. So yeah. Sweet dreams. Call me back. Bye.”

Patricia glances at the roses, uncomfortable ache in her chest. She pushes down the urge to pick up the phone and dial. Goes back to moisturizing, breath strained, fingers kneading into a stubborn knot. She lets out the tension in one long exhale.

He’s not worth the pain.

*

Patricia goes to the office every evening for the rest of the month to get the zine finished. Stays there for hours, sometimes til sunrise. Sleep an afterthought. She can’t handle seeing Billy again so she skips talking with the rest of the band. Interviews Black Knife instead, another up and coming group with great potential. Not as flat-out amazing but good nonetheless. She made sure that she chose a band not playing anywhere near Cat’s Eye. Laying low.

She comes home on the last night of secret work, exhausted. A haggard zombie. Heavy box of completed zines held under her chin. Only the first set, three more to pick up this week before she delivers them. She leans the box against the door for support. Slips her key in the door knob with a sigh.

Cold fear sweeps her spine. *Unlocked.*

She’s never one to forget and clearly remembers locking it. She panics, searching inside her leather jacket for her pocket knife. Slowly opens the door, trembling. Encumbered by the cardboard heap in her arms. Maybe she should set it down. Or throw it at the intruder.

Relief and repulsion hits her when she sees who’s responsible. Fucking Derek. Sitting on the couch, guitar case by his side. Slim, tall and movie-star handsome. Shoulder-length chestnut hair curling over his profile. Cheekbones for days. The kind of face teenage girls paste

on their walls. Kiss before they sleep.

At least they might if he had any talent at all. If Derek could get his dad to buy it for him, he would. Just like he paid for every bit of high-end leather on his lean body. Though as she gets closer, lean is looking more like gaunt. Actually, every step gets more and more alarming. He's hunching over a baggie of white powder spilled out on the oak of her just-cleaned coffee table. A tightly rolled bill in his fingers.

How *dare* he.

Patricia's snarl tears through the room. "What the flying fuck are you doing here, Derek?"

Hazel eyes glance in surprise, heavy shadows under them. A cold smile greets her, nostrils chalky above. "Hey, doll-face."

She drops the box on the kitchen table and it tips over. Magazines fan out like playing cards, several falling on the tile. Layers of Billy's pretty face peeking. "This is so wrong. You can't just come in here anymore."

"I had some stuff to pick up." He cuts into powder with a gold credit card. Never paid one bill for it. "You don't ever answer your phone. What did you expect?"

"And what did you have to pick up, Derek?" She flings her hand towards the cocaine. "Your fucking stash? I can't believe you. And doing it while I'm not here? That's disgusting."

His tone goes hostile. "It's China White, Pat. Not like I was just going to leave it."

"I don't give a shit what it is, Derek. You need to get the hell out of here." She leans down, lowers herself to his level, eyes knifing. Like if she glares hard enough it'll knock sense into his coke-addled brain. "Now."

He barely looks up, absorbed with creating thin, white lines. "Somebody's been taking her bitch pills today."

"I can't fucking stand you." Her voice quakes with rage as she points towards the door. "Get out."

"Let me just finish this.' He cuts another clean edge.

"Fine." There's obviously no budging him and she'd rather not scream or punch. "Snort your brains out. Just hurry the hell up and leave, alright?"

"Alright, alright. Fuck, you're a psycho sometimes."

She laughs, nettled. "I'm the psycho? Who's the one sneaking into people's homes to do coke, Derek, huh? You are *so* out of line. Snort and beat it, asshole."

She used to love Derek so much she felt sick with it. Now she feels sick for an entirely different reason. She can't believe what her eyes are taking in. He's so much worse since the breakup. A broken shell of his former self. Pallid-white and greasy. Coke-famished. Not even winning the genetic lottery can he hide the fact that he's slipping hard. So toxic she can almost see green fumes radiating out his skin. Soulful eyes gone dead. Spark stolen.

The phone rings. Patricia gets a twinge in her stomach.

"You're going to get yourself in trouble one day with that bitch mouth of yours, Pat." The rolled bill drags down the coffee table. *Sniff*. "Not attractive. You're prettier when you don't talk." Another ring.

"Whatever, loser. Get lost. We are so fucking done." *Brrrinnng*.

"Are you going to pick that up or what?" Derek looks up with annoyance. Patricia can't stop staring at the grey hollows of his cheeks.

Too late. It goes to voicemail. Her heart falls into her gut.

"Hey, Trish. It's me. Again." Billy. A slight slur in his voice, drizzled with booze. White noise of chatter and guitar in the background. "Uh, kay, I'm a lil' tipsy but I need to get this off my chest. Look, I know it's been rocky with us since the beginning. And I know you

just got out of a relationship, but I really think we have somethin' here. And I think you know it too. No, I *know* you know it. And...yeah, I think you're making a mistake freezin' me out like this. I dunno, was it the panties in my car? Feel like that fucked me over."

Patricia moves to pick up before further chaos ensues, but Derek snaps to his feet, blocking her. Bloodshot eyes zeroing in on the machine like he's going to murder it.

"-anyways, I'm super into you. And I'm pretty damn sure you feel the same way. And like, if you're gettin' over your ex still, I can wait. Take things slow. We don't have to fuck again til you're ready, and I'm sorry if you felt pressured to do that. That was shitty of me. I just...wanna see you." There's a pause. "Fuck, this is stupid." A long breath. "Fuck it. I don't care. Call me. I'll take you surfing. Give you some pointers or whatever. Kay. Bye, Trish." Click.

Derek looks like he just got hit by a battering ram. Skin even more ghostly. "Who the hell was that?"

Patricia feels faint, but she keeps her chin high. "Just some guy I met."

He gets up in her face, smelling of sour musk. "Just some guy? I haven't even finished picking up my stuff and now some surfer asshole thinks you're soulmates or something? And you let him fuck you like a whore? Who the fuck is he, *Trish*?" He says the nickname like it's the worst thing he's ever heard.

"It was just a fling, Derek." She takes a step back. "And *I'm* the whore? You cheated on me. Like, three times. You've got nothing. You can't guilt me out on this one. Get out."

He slams his body back down into the couch. Snorts the last line with force. Rubs at his nose, sniffing wetly. "Slut."

Patricia sees red. "Say that again and I'll call the cops. I'm serious. You're being a massive tool."

"You're a massive bitch."

She bolts over to the phone. Snatches it up to her ear, making an

obvious glance to the cocaine. "I'm dialing."

Derek's eyes turn to saucers, bugging. "Okay, okay. I'll fucking go." He gathers his paraphernalia. Stuffs it in his shiny leather bag. Mint-fresh. Probably cost hundreds of dollars. "I'll just say this. You're not the girl I met.

The *nerve*. She slams the phone in the cradle. "You're not the guy I met. The guy I met wasn't a cheating, lying coke-head."

"The girl I met wasn't a giant slut that hopped on the first dick that came along."

Well, that's a laugh. "Um?" Her brows knit. "Yeah, I was. I totally was. But I was loyal to you, Derek. And guess what? Got me nowhere. I'll take the slut life, thanks. At least that way I actually come."

He heaves his guitar case over his shoulder. "Bye, bitch."

"Bye, fuckhead." She waves. "Good riddance. Don't come back."

Derek slams the door so loud, Patricia's neighbour yells through the wall in protest. He leaves a poisonous energy in his wake, room now twisted with hatred. Patricia refuses to sleep in his demonic vibes.

She opens the windows wide and burns white sage just like Ma used to do.

*

August hits and the latest issue of Live Wire gets released in all the local music stores that now regularly take her zine. The demand is too high not to. She gets only a small percentage of the profit. Takes home just enough to continue creating articles and attending shows. Nothing more.

Later in the month, one of her favourite local bands, Ions, is playing at The Glitz Bar. She decides to check it out and let loose. No interviewing. No recording or analyzing of any kind. No glamming up for backstage access. She needs to just have fun for once. Enjoy the music without thinking of what the review's going to entail. Maybe

she'll take a break from the zine for a month. She's just so fucking tired.

So that night it's just a fitted black t-shirt tucked into blue jeans. A smear of cherry-chapstick and she's gone.

It's a beautiful L.A night. Streets alive with the thrall of booming guitar. Sex and feral youth. A tinge of danger in the filthy-warm air, a glamorous trash jungle. Hits the spot so sweetly. The inside of The Glitz is bumping. Beautiful peacocks on display as usual. She wishes she brought her camera so she could capture the dirty mystique.

Ions is a great band. Typical hair metal but they do it right. Raw and nasty. Patricia feels comfortable dancing alone to them. Cheering them on. Getting lost in their animalistic fervour. Enjoys being invisible for once, no hungry eyes on her, no one going for the kill. Just her and the music. Melding into one beat.

Half-way through the set, she grabs a rum-and-coke from the bar. Sweaty from writhing and yelling. When she turns around, she crashes into a hard wall of muscle. Bruising. A miracle she doesn't spill her drink. Though it's the worst luck when she sees just who she smashed into.

"Fuck, sorry." Billy, looking ever-gorgeous in black leather. Eyes snapping wide for a second. Arm draped around a stunning tan creature with long black hair and cat-like green eyes. Rare beauty in a dress of tight blood-red.

Patricia can't breathe. Can't think. Can only feel that she's the most hideous swine to ever disgrace the earth compared to this chick. Out of all the nights to not dress up.

"Oh. Hi." Patricia swallows, frozen in place. Dumb expression glued on. A fierce desire to get swallowed up by the black and white tile under her boots.

"Hey," Clear eyes go stoic, mouth hardening into a detached line. Playing it way too cool. Unreadable.

"Well, uh. You like...um..the music?" She cringes inside. Smooth,

Patricia.

“Yeah...they’re cool.” A clearing of his throat. Careful glance to the babe on his arm.

Awkward. Tense. Horrible. The beauty-queen looks at her suspiciously, emerald eyes narrowing.

“Cool. Well. Bye.” She can’t stay here a second longer. She pushes past the red-hot couple, through the dense crowd. Chugs back her drink in two big gulps and slams it haphazardly on a bar stool. Then she’s out the door. Into the muggy night to shed her mortification.

Patricia doesn’t make it very far before a hand is firm on her shoulder.

“Trish. Hey, wait a sec.”

“What?” She spins around. Billy’s intense expression meets hers and she can’t control the sparks. Crimson roses burning to a golden cinder. A glance at his t-shirt and she sees a black wolf on tight white fabric.

Fantastic. Another wink from the ether. Carl Jung would love this shit.

“Hey, uh,” He runs a hand through his tousled blonde locks. A colour of anxiety in the motion. Good. She’s not the only one off-kilter. “Just wanted to say, bought the latest copy of Live Wire and...you hit it out of the park. Made us look great. We’re booking gigs left and right now and it’s all because of you. So. Thanks.”

“Yeah, no problem.” She slowly inches away. “Bye.”

There’s a sound of frustration as she turns. “Jesus, Trish. Don’t do that fucking thing you always do.”

“What thing?” She doesn’t stop, eyes fixed ahead on the vibrant green of a stoplight.

He keeps pace, facing her. Walking backwards. “You keep running from me.”

"I'm not running. I am walking home." She shoulders past him. "Goodnight."

"Trish." He grabs her hand, forcing her still. Looks her dead in the eye, the impact going straight to her gut. "I would have fucking waited, okay."

That hits like a brick. Winded. She's too humiliated to acknowledge it. Feels bruised and weak and ugly. She snatches her hand back and immediately misses the warmth. "Yeah. Well. She's pretty. Congrats."

Shoulders shrug to his ears. "Yeah, Sarah's alright. Nice girl."

Who just happens to look like she walked off the runway. "How long have you guys been seeing each other?"

"Like...four weeks." He can't meet her gaze when he says it, glancing down the busy street.

Basically since their night on the pier. Maybe even before that. Pierces deeper than she'd like it to. "Oh."

"Why didn't you call me back?" He can't hide the disappointment on his face. Maybe he's not trying to. A foreign concept.

"I don't think we feel the same way about each other." Her stomach turns.

"Yeah. Okay," A bitter scoff. "That's why you're stormin' off right now. Totally unbothered."

"Well, for a guy that said he could wait, you sure didn't wait that long to get your dick wet." The resentment in her tone startles her, a burst of dark emotion. She immediately regrets it.

Billy's arms fold, eyes flashing as he leans down to her level. A little scary. "Woulda been a lot fuckin' different if you had phoned me back, Trish. Don't give me that bullshit. I already made a fucking fool out of myself chasing after you. Don't know what more you want."

Patricia says the painful truth. Blurts it out in a sharp tumble. "I don't know what I want. I don't see this working between us. And I don't

trust you.” She gets a rush of guilt. “Sorry.”

His face falls with vivid hurt. Brows furrowing before he goes stone-cold, ocean waves to blue ice. A door slamming shut on her. “Alright. I won’t give you a reason to.”

He turns on his heel and Patricia watches him walk away. An easy saunter that reveals nothing. Pale hair stark against inky leather. The snap of a lighter. Smoke billowing around him before he’s engulfed by the pink-neon glow of The Glitz bar. Vanished.

Her heart sits right in her throat the whole walk home. Close to falling out her mouth, exploding bloody on the pavement.

Patricia kicks off her boots when she’s through her front door. Sinks to her knees in front of the phone, eyes watery. She blinks moisture back. Sniffles as she dials.

“Amy? Hey, babe. It’s Pat.” She finds a dried-up red petal on the carpet. Crushes it between her fingers. “About the Vegas bachlorette...how wild are we talking here?”

7. heaven or las vegas

Notes for the Chapter:

Lately it occurs to me, what a long, strange trip this chapter is.

There's A LOT going on in this one so bear with me.

Before Patricia kicks off her Vegas road trip, she decides to make a pit stop at Auntie Doris's in Santa Barbara. She takes the 1979 purple Dodge Aspen that Doris gifted her when she turned twenty-one. Probably one of the happiest moments of her life when she received it. Been her baby ever since. A companion through thick and thin. Glitters violet-pink in the California sunshine.

Doris is Ma's older sister. Glinda the Good Witch to Ma's Wicked West. Patricia had lived with her in Pasadena since she was ten. Rescued from a rat's nest of a home in the dangerous guts of The Bronx, New York. Ma couldn't take care of her anymore. Couldn't feed or bathe her. Couldn't feed or bathe herself. Pulled under by the drowning stupor of heroin. Doris and her husband, Ricky, had to literally drag Ma screaming to rehab. A short stint before she escaped.

Years of this on and off. Rehab, run, rehab, run, rehab, run. Ma finally kicked the horse about the time Patricia turned eighteen. There was no tender re-union. The relationship was rotten to the roots and Ma was still no better of a human. Still mean. Still selfish. Still using her savage beauty to ensnare sugar daddies and famous keepers. Lusting after a peak high she'll never get.

Last time they were face to face was at the same birthday party where Patricia received her new car. Ma showed up gift-less and stoned off her ass on painkillers. Raided the fridge for food before leaving early. Didn't say hello or goodbye. Auntie Doris had hugged Patricia's shaking body all night.

She's phoned Ma twice since then. Two failed attempts at connection. Short, tense conversations with Ma itching to flee, leaving her

heartbroken to a buzzing dial tone. Just an “I’ll call you” that never happened. No “I love you’s”. Ma only ever said that when she was peaking on some good shit.

Ma lives in a Las Vegas trailer park with a long-term boyfriend now. Still never calls. Still heavily sedated on prescription painkillers from what Doris says. A hungry ghost forever lost to opiates. Patricia wants to be mad, vengeful, but all she feels is a dead weight in her veins. A sorrow dense and heavy. She couldn’t help Ma. Couldn’t make her happy. Wasn’t good enough for her. She loved heroin so much more.

Auntie Doris lives in a sea-side cottage now. Happily retired. Widowed. A home brimming with plants, glowing with life. Making her own yogurt, sewing her own clothes, and chickens in the backyard. Crystals on the windowsills. A hippie in heaven.

Ma was sort of a hippie too. A sixties queen that rode out that nature-loving trend. Only she got sidetracked by the siren’s call of the needle. Didn’t quite make it all the way. Doris lives and breathes it daily.

When Patricia parks the Aspen in the dirt driveway, a canopy of trees above, Doris is already sitting outside on the front steps. Up-do of strawberry blonde catching sunlight through the greenery. Wisps of silver in the mix.

“Patty!” She gives an enthusiastic wave, homemade yellow sweater sagging. Hops to her birkenstocked feet.

Patricia steps out and is enveloped in a fierce hug. “Hey, Auntie Doris. So good to see you.”

“Baby, you are looking so good. Ooh, love your sundress.” Doris glances to light-blue paisley grazing soil. “All grown up, aren’t you? Such a lovely lady. A real dish.”

“You’d say that if I was covered in boils and had gangrene, but I’ll take it.” Patricia kisses her rosy cheek. “And I wore this just for you. Thought I’d bring the sixties back. Or is it the seventies?” She does a quick twirl, one hand to the sky. A pastel sea dances around her

ankles.

"I do miss those days," Doris takes Patricia's hands in hers. "but god, am I grateful it's over."

"Me too." Patricia gives a grim smile. Shared memories needing no elaboration.

"Much better times now. Like night and day, isn't it?"

She's not so sure about that statement. "Yeah...it's alright."

"You've been eating properly, hun?" Doris scans over her, fretting.

Patricia goes frigid in an instant, hands stiff. She can't stand it when Aunt Doris asks her that. "I'm *fine*, Auntie. Don't worry about me."

"Sometimes I *do* worry. Especially with you living alone. Easy to fall back into bad habits."

Patricia jerks her hands away. She hasn't relapsed in years.

"What, so you're going to watch me today? Make sure I don't sneak to the bathroom after lunch or something?" Hot emotion flares up her throat. "You really don't need to ask me that anymore. Feels like you don't trust me." Tears tickle behind her eyeballs, sudden and startling as she chokes them back. She doesn't recognize this pathetic baby that keeps trying to bust out.

Doris looks just as surprised. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I trust you, didn't mean to pry." She rubs Patricia's back carefully. "Why don't we go inside now? Just made sandwiches and tea." She motions to the dream-house.

"Sorry to spaz on you, Auntie." Patricia tries to steady her breaths. "Just had a crazy couple of months. Not myself."

It's easy to relax when she passes through the ivy-circled front door. One step inside and Patricia's greeted by a paradise of tropical green over shining wood floor. A supernatural sparkle to every leaf. She runs her hand over the oak railing of the spiral staircase made by Uncle Ricky before he passed. "God, this place is still heaven. It's too

bad you moved here after I went to university. Would have loved to live in this place growing up.”

“You can always stay forever, Patty.” A teasing wink. “You’re the one that wants to live in that smelly, mean town. Garbage City.”

“Always did have a taste for trash.” Patricia grins back.

Rich black tea is poured at the hand-made oak table by a big bay window. A tray of various sandwiches is set down. Chocolate chip cookies come next. Patricia watches hummingbirds hover around a red feeder. Blue waves beckon beyond. The sight encases her in a warmth she’s been missing, nourished by it. She wolfs down her lunch easily, licks chocolatey crumbs off her lips. Then she remembers what she’s been thinking of the whole drive here. Glances to the lady across from her who looks so much like Ma sometimes that it makes her heart hurt.

“Auntie? I have a question.” Patricia scoops a teaspoon of sugar in a porcelain teacup. Blue forget-me-nots painted round the gilded edge.

“What’s that, peaches?” Doris pours cream into her cup. “Say when.”

“When.” The stream stops, leaving a milky swirl behind. “Do you... still do readings?”

Doris smiles, a bit wary. “Haven’t touched the deck in about a year.”

Patricia’s finger runs down a grain of wood. “I’m going through some stuff right now. And I...think I really need one. Kind of confused. About everything.” She gives Doris a pained smile. “Why haven’t you been reading? Used to draw a card every day.”

“Oh, I dunno.” Doris shrugs. “Sometimes ignorance is bliss, isn’t it? I’d rather not know what’s coming. Doesn’t always help to anticipate.”

“I want to know.” Patricia nods firmly. Takes a sip of creamy-hot tea.

Auntie Doris looks at her for a moment. Considering. “Alright, Patty. I’ll give it a whirl, just for you.” She gets up to rummage through a china cabinet drawer. Pulls out a deck of tarot cards wrapped in

indigo silk as Patricia helps clear the table off. Doris plops back down, cracks her neck and shoulders, closes her eyes as she takes a few deep inhales.

Patricia holds her breath as freckled hands begin to shuffle. Watches eyes fluttering, feels atmosphere shifting.

Doris exhales slowly, meditative state achieved. "What do you want to know, Patty?"

"What's going to be happening in my life over the coming months?" Patricia stares as the cards ripple. "I can't see a future for myself. I'm stuck. Rat on a wheel."

The cards keep moving through feminine fingers. A natural ease to it, done so many times before.

Her hands stop.

"Let's see." Doris starts laying cards flat, glazed eyes observing. She frowns, then smiles. Frowns again. "Hmm. That's interesting."

"What?" Patricia scans the cards. Recognizes a few that don't look too good. Specifically the one with swords sticking out of a guy's bleeding back. Another with a heart stabbed through three times. "Shit. It's bad, right?"

"Not necessarily. Not all of it." More cards get laid down. "This is a real mixed bag." The last card gets flattened to the table. "We're talking highs and lows of epic proportions, my dear. Whew." Gray eyes scan over the spread. "Wowza."

Patricia gets impatient. "Can you be more specific?"

"Just give me a second. I've gotta read it, don't I?" Doris keeps gazing, nodding. Looks up with a questioning eye. "Have you been doing something you shouldn't, Pat?" She points to a card of a man hustling away with swords stowed in his hands. A thief in the night. "Something sneaky?"

Patricia immediately thinks of the zine. Of secret keys and tiptoed steps. "Uh...sort of?"

“Be careful with that. Whatever it is.”

Excuses want to spill. “Auntie...I-”

Doris gives a dismissive wave of her hand. “You don’t have to tell me what it is. Just be careful.” She points to another card. “Got the Devil card in the past here. Kind of hoping you’re not dabbling in things you shouldn’t, sweetie.”

“That’s probably Derek. And...other stuff.” Like a certain drummer fucking her against a certain dirty Doghouse sink. “Derek went full-on cokehead. Broke up with him about a month ago. Kicked him to the curb.”

Aunt Doris gives a lengthy sigh of relief. “Oh, thank goodness, Pat. Never did like that boy. Gave me a bad feeling.”

“A lot of people said that.”

“I’m so proud of you.” Doris reaches across the table to place her hand over hers. “It’s not always easy to leave.”

“So what’s coming?” Patricia leans over the table, wants to move on.

“Welp.” Doris rests her elbow on the wood, chin in hand. “Wheel of Fortune. So, huge changes. And then, the good stuff-” Her fingers float over a naked couple entwined in Eden. Over a blonde man sitting on a bejewelled throne, golden sceptre in his fist. “The Lovers and King of Wands. Big romance in the near future. I’m sensing *lots* of passion. And that Ace of Cups in the middle too. Aw, that’s so sweet.” Doris smiles wistfully.

Patricia’s heart does a backflip. She ignores it, not ready to be hopeful about a man again.

“But then it gets tricky.” Auntie points to the remaining cards. A plethora of muddy shades mixed with deep red. “The Tower. Five of Swords. Three of Swords. Lots and lots of swords. I really get the feeling you need to be very careful, sweetie. Careful about where you’re hanging out. Who you’re spending time with. Who you let in.”

“Oh.” Patricia’s shoulders tense along with her gut. The bleak cards

look so ugly. She had been hoping for all the pretty ones today. "That's not good."

"Maybe you should line your door with salt. Take one of my black tourmaline stones for protection."

"*Woah.*" Patricia feels a freezing trickle down her spine. Remembers Ma pouring salt across their doorstep, convinced her dope dealer was plotting to kill her. Always was a superstitious family. "That bad, huh?"

"-but then, on the other hand, you've got The Star. Ten of Cups." Doris's eyes light up. "There's so much good here. So much sweetness." She makes another face at the dark half of the cards. "Just a lot of weird stuff in the mix. Hard to say exactly what it is, but yes. Be careful."

Patricia deflates into her seat. "Not really what I wanted to hear."

"See, this is what I mean about the cards. Sometimes it's better not to know. It can drive you crazy." She gets up, walks over to the china cabinet again. Takes out a palm-sized black rock. "But in this case, I'd say. It's better you do. Now you can make wiser choices." She places the rough stone in Patricia's open hand. "Take precautions."

The stone feels cool to the touch, gleaming black with hints of gold. "I guess...I'll try to be careful then? For whatever the hell it is?"

Auntie Doris comforts with a hand stroking down Patricia's hair. "The cards are funny that way. They can dictate the energy, I just never know exactly what's coming. The details are always missing. Wish I was a bit more psychic."

"Yeah." Patricia stares at the stone in her hand. A sinking feeling in her belly. "Me too."

*

The drive across the Mojave desert is lonely and divine. Open road of sepia dust against stunning blue sky. She's longed for it. For the hidden presence of scorpions. Of coyotes and rattlesnakes. For the green cacti and the endless plains beyond the road. Empty and

desolate. The stark nothing a reprieve from the tightly wound pandemonium of Hollywood. Amy offered to pay for her plane ticket but there's no way she'd miss this.

The radio blasts Grateful Dead from her speakers, one of her favourite psychedelic bands. One of the few that Ma *didn't* go through like toilet paper. Makes the ride even smoother. Until she hears *when life looks like easy street, there is danger at your door* .

Patricia turns the radio off. Silence is just as good.

Yes, she breathes freer, deeper, cleaner out here. Leaving the mess behind. Leaving the horror of needles and white powder. Of bathroom syringes and hearts destroyed.

If only she could leave Billy behind as easily. His dreamy visage looms in front of her throughout the whole trip. Haunting. Making her chest tighten, her body tingle. Was she too cruel? Too judgemental? A giant bitch?

A fierce *no* stings in her mind. Sinks down like the tail of a scorpion. Lethal. Cold. Why risk the damage? The inevitable descent?

Derek was a doting angel at first. Gave her gifts and trinkets, expensive jewellery. Chocolate and flowers and french kisses. A trail of adoration that took her breath away. Too good to be true. But she pushed her pesky doubts under the surface, plunged them to drown every time they inevitably bobbed back up.

Turned out her gut was right on the money. Who knows how much of Derek's fairytale love was even real. She was taken for a ride. Domestic bliss before it turned into a balls-to-the wall gongshow from hell. The carpet pulled out mean and fast from under her. Feet to the air. Landed hard.

Billy wasn't even sweet to begin with, all snark and blunt seduction. What evidence has he given her that he would be better? If anything, he'd probably be worse. A former coke-head, huh? Yeah, sure. Give it a few months. Watch it go from "only at parties" to "only when I'm tired" to "it's not a big deal, everybody does it."

It's all an illusion, the beginning. Projections, prisms, mirrors. Smokescreens and fantasies. See what you want to see. Hear and touch and taste the dream, so promising at first. So real.

Not real. Just a mirage that shifts and distorts like clouds across the desert horizon. By the time you realize, it's too late.

She won't fall for it again. She's got bigger fish to fry now anyway.

Patricia feels inside the breast pocket of her dress. Fingers skim the note Aunt Doris gave her before they hugged goodbye. An address written in round, loopy letters. A call to the outskirts of Las Vegas. To the dusty desert trailer-park she's never seen before.

Ma's place.

*

"Hit me."

Patricia's watching Amy count cards. Queens and Kings and Aces pressed into forest-green fabric, their stoic faces staring up at her. Stakes rising. Bright red chips stacked to noses.

Her heart's no longer in the game, calling at every turn, trapped on an endless series of stools that her hips spill over. Can't feel her legs anymore as they dangle. A pawn in Amy's plan to seek and destroy.

They should play poker instead. Or even slots. She'll take a streak of cherries over this sketchy shit any day. The dealer is looking at Amy like she's a wily threat, going to huff and puff and clean the house out.

"Amy-darling?" She leans over and whispers. "I think the staff is starting to notice."

"Notice what?" Amy's distracted by playing cards slapping down. "*Hit me.*" A King of Spades flips upright and a smile lights up Amy's face.

"That you never *lose*. We've been here for hours. My ass is sore from sitting so long."

“But I’m on a roll,” she protests.

Like it matters. Amy could probably buy this whole casino, no gambling necessary.

“I *hate* Blackjack. Sick of it.” Patricia slides off her stool, feet numb on the burgundy carpet. Grimaces as blood rushes to her legs. “Let’s go. Time for drink two.”

“Hitting the booze already? The party hasn’t even started yet.”

“Yeah, well. Desperate times, babe.” Patricia drains her glass of gin and tonic. Sucks at the wedge of lime, sour zing on her tongue. “Haven’t gotten drunk since college. Bad break-up. I’m in Vegas. Sue me.”

Amy stands up, stretches happily before gathering the lion’s share on the table. A waterfall of crimson chips pour into her open Armani bag. “You know what? You’re right. I will join you in your royal booziness, my lady.”

Patricia cocks a brow. “Have I ever seen you get drunk? Can’t remember.”

“I’ve never gotten drunk.”

“Huh.” She pauses at that. Knows better. “Mmm, you know what? Maybe we shouldn’t. I don’t want to be responsible for pulling you down to my level.” She rubs Amy’s shoulder empathetically. “Could get pretty hairy.”

Amy waves her away. “It’ll be fun! Drunk people always seem like they’re having a good time.”

“Then you clearly haven’t met enough of them.”

“I think it’ll help smooth the night over. Make it less weird.”

“Weird? What’ll be weird about it?”

Amy adjusts the purse strap on her shoulder, tilts slightly at the weight. Suddenly very focused on the swirling patterns on the carpet.

“The male strippers?”

Patricia nearly collapses. “*What?*”

“I thought it’d be fun...” Amy offers a devilish grin.

That’s the last straw. “Amy? Darling?” Patricia grabs her gently by the shoulders. “Who swapped you for your evil twin? You’re freaking me out. I didn’t even know you could count cards til an hour ago.”

“My dad taught me.” Brown eyes blink nervously at Patricia’s all-seeing ones. “He’s always playing blackjack with his friends.”

“Always cheating.”

“It’s technically not illegal.” Amy counters. “And Dad always says I’m using an alternate strategy. Playing the game how it was meant to be played. Like...blackjack for experts?”

Patricia snorts. “I’m gonna disagree with him now that security has their eyeballs glued to you.” She glances around the casino floor. Scans over riffing dealers, swaying drunks, acrid cigarette haze. “Where’s the rest of your crew? Thought we’d all be be wasted in Margarita-ville by now.”

“Crystal will be here any minute. And Monica and Debbie are coming around eight.”

“That’s it?” Patricia asks. Amy’s a social butterfly. A mother hen constantly gathering a large circle of female friends under her wing. Patricia just has Amy. “Thought there’d be more.”

“I’m only bringing my closest friends. You’ve met them before. We went to a few of their pool parties in our UCLA days, remember?”

Great. Those chicks. The ones that all share one diamond-encrusted brain cell. “The rich-bitch posse, huh?”

“Pat! That’s mean.” Amy’s pink bottom lip juts out.

“Sorry,” Patricia shrugs. “Just feel poor as hell around them.” And highly superior. She didn’t have to buy her grades to get through

university. Didn't have a daddy that would shake all the right hands and pull all the right strings.

"I told you I'll pay for everything."

"Exactly my point . "

Amy links her arm through Patricia's, pats her hand as she pulls them towards the glistening mahogany bar. Smoke parting to reveal a liquor-lined oasis. "Let's go get that drink."

*

Amy's a drunken wreck.

Patricia barely took another sip, nursed a single neat whiskey all night because she knew this would happen. Watched as Amy downed shots of tequila despite constantly warning her not to. Now Patricia's rubbing Amy's back as she cries into a hotel toilet bowl. Oiled naked men wriggle in the next room to the shrieks of delighted rich girls. Amy doesn't get to enjoy any of it.

"Pat, this party-" *Gag* " -fuckin' sucks. "

Patricia pushes Amy's hair back from her porcelain-smooth cheek. "It's not so bad. Me and Gregory really bonded back there. Do you think it's the twenty I slipped in his g-string?"

"He jus' wants your money, Pat." Amy sputters, tears running in a miserable stream. "...he doesn' care about us...n'body cares 'bout us. And I'm ugly."

"Shh shh...I won't let you say that for one second." Patricia takes on a theatrical tone. Suits this surreal freak-show of an evening. "Hush now. I care about you. And you're more beautiful than any showgirl we've seen tonight. Though Gregory might put us both to shame."

"Don' even know why I'm here." Amy sounds so defeated. Vegas dreams cashed in to find it was all counterfeit. "Sucha bad idea...s'bad."

"You just wanted to have fun before the wedding, hun," Patricia's

fingers soothe down Amy's neck and shoulders.

"Yeah, 'cause 'm never gonna have fun again. Scott. Fuckin' Scott. Boring."

Patricia holds back a maniacal cackle. So she *does* know. "He's okay..."

He's awful.

"I don' know if I even love him after all, Pat."

Thank god. Maybe she won't have to stand up and object on their wedding day now. "No?"

"Think I jus' wanted to get married so I wouldn't have to obsess 'bout it anymore."

"Well, that's understandable."

"Also... he's not very good in bed."

Not a shocker. "Oh, dear."

"Yah, can hardly get it up. Has to read Hustler before we do it. Says 'm too skinny to get him hot."

Patricia's jaw drops. Oh, *hell no*. Amy should be running away screaming. "What a fucking dickhead! Honey, you deserve so much better than that bullshit. I'm gonna kick his boring, white-bread ass all the way back to Connecticut."

Amy explodes into a banshee wail. Fountaining into the toilet bowl.

"Oh god. Oh no. I'm sorry." Patricia scrambles for tissues. Dabs at Amy's blubbering face. "I'm sorry. Please don't cry. I won't kick his ass." She wipes at Amy's nose. "...unless you want me to."

"I can't do it." Amy sniffles. "Can't do it, Pat."

"You don't *have* to, honey. It's so much better that you realize this now, right?"

“Is it?” Amy stares blearily into porcelain.

“Yes!”

Amy goes silent for a moment. “I wan’ go to bed, Pat. M’ tired.”

Patricia nods. “Alright, darling. I’ll tuck you in. I’m gonna tell everybody to leave.” She gets up and crosses the room. Can’t wait to kick those loud bitches out. “Time for the Valley girls to go the fuck to sleep.”

“Be nice?” Amy knows her too well. “Be nice, Pat...please.”

Patricia pauses at the door. Gives a big sigh. “*Okay*. Only because I love you. Takes the fun right out of it though.”

Patricia doesn’t sleep in her paid-for hotel room that night. A ritzy thing with a clawfoot bathtub and Egyptian cotton sheets. She curls up next to Amy, making sure she’s rolled over on her side. Heard too many horror stories about rockstars choking on their own vomit. Probably overkill on her part but she won’t take the chance.

She spends one more day at the hotel, poolside while Amy struggles through a terrible hangover next to her. Lazed out miserably in the sun, dark hair a disheveled mess, Bloody Mary in hand and moaning under giant, bug-eyed sunglasses. Not the greatest intro to Drunk World but at least it’s realistic.

Then it’s off into the Mojave desert again that same evening. Patricia sneaks a cheque in Amy’s purse to pay for the hotel room before she leaves. Wishes her a good flight back. Resists giving the rich-bitch posse the middle finger on the way out. Oh, the temptation.

*

It takes about thirty minutes to drive to Ma’s place from the hotel, arriving in blood-orange dusk. She’s so damn nervous, her hands shake on the wheel. Maybe this is a stupid idea. Her gut is doing somersaults.

Patricia pulls her car outside the big beige trailer, a chainlink fence between them. A bed of scarlet begonias out front, the lights on

inside. Wind-chimes tinkle in the hot air. A dog howls restlessly in the distance, sounding wild with hunger. She just stares, knuckles tight to the wheel. Radio off so there's only heat and silence and fear. A hurricane of anxiety in her, screaming inside.

She sits there for a long time. Waiting for something nameless. A signal. A sign. An omen. Watching the shadows for movement through their sheer-curtained window.

The front door opens. A man steps out.

She takes off, wheels screeching. Dust trailing like clouds behind her.

*

Patricia's way too tired to be driving in the dark. In fact, despite having only one drink hours ago and a respectable night's sleep, she's still extremely groggy.

Must be the August full moon, already here again, bright as the headlights flooding the road in front of her. It gleams eerily bone-white and sinister tonight. Making her weird and spacey, making her mind swim and warp. Looks like she's not going to make it back to L.A until tomorrow. Time for bed-

Patricia slams on the breaks. A coyote scampers across the road, eyes glowing. She clutches at her chest as it disappears into blackness. "Could have been roadkill so easy, buddy." Her voice cracks in the pin-drop quiet.

She pulls over at the next cheap motel. A gross, grungy place but she'd rather stay here than take more of Amy's money. She can't afford to slip her another big cheque like that. Nearly wiped her bank account clean.

Patricia parks her car and pays for the night. Walks back around the building to get to her room, duffel bag hauled over one shoulder. There's a gangly man with long hair in a ponytail hanging around the dumpster, watching her carefully from the shadows. She gets a really weird vibe from him. Unlocks her room with frantic fingers and gets in quick, bolting the door shut. Peeks through the curtains but can't

see him anymore. Maybe she's just being paranoid. The moonlight does funny things sometimes, can you make you act plain crazy.

She lands in her bed in an exhausted pile. Puts in her earplugs out of habit and falls into a heavy, deep sleep.

*

When Patricia wakes up, it's with her heart pounding. She had dreamt of the night-time sea. Her naked form lay wet in the sand as a faceless man emerged from the water, phosphorescent colors illuminating blue-green around him. He lay down next to her. Kissed her temple in the dark. Whispered *safe*.

The clock on the wall says it's almost ten, opaque light streaming onto mysteriously stained sheets. She sits up with a groan, stretching out the kinks, an uneasy feeling in her chest. Rolls out of bed to drink grimy water from the bathroom tap. Her stomach growls. She thinks of the granola bars and red ambrosia apples she has stowed in her trunk. Should probably eat them sooner than later. Then she glances out the window and almost faints.

Her car is gone.

She bursts out the door into scorching sunlight, looking all directions to see nothing but a deserted gas station, empty motel parking lot and heatwaves rising off the lonesome road. She sinks silently to the yellow curb stop. Sits there in total shock, feeling like a helpless child. Takes a lifetime for her to stand up again, every muscle clenched up tight. Skin burning under desert rays.

Eventually she goes to the motel front desk, tail between her legs. Strangely guilty. The staff call the police and report the theft. She's told that there's not a high chance she'll get the car back. The best she can do now is use the insurance to get a new vehicle and hope for the best. Looks like Doris's gift might be gone forever.

Maybe *this* is what the cards were trying to tell her. They didn't do much good, did they? Didn't help one bit. Maybe it is better not to know. Now she's going to obsess about how she wasn't careful enough despite being warned. Could have taken the battery out of

the car. Or gone straight to Los Angeles without stopping. Or she could have just taken the damn money to fly to Vegas to begin with. So many possibilities.

However, now the more pressing question is: how the fuck is she going to get home?

She's hours away from Los Angeles, *just* over the lip of the California border. Miles from Las Vegas. Amy would have just gotten on the plane to L.A now. She doesn't have enough money for a cab ride that long. No buses run this way. Aunt Doris is gone up to Mount Shasta for the week. Despite having a little black book filled to capacity, she's not exactly close enough to anyone to ask for a ride. Nor are they likely to easily find her. Derek was the only person that might have, but there's no way in hell she's calling him now.

Then Patricia gets another awful, very stupid idea. A long shot. Will probably backfire horrendously. Extremely high chance she'll get hung up on but her intuition is on fire, potential humiliation be damned. In fact, she's putting quarters in the payphone before she can stop herself, pulse frenetic, only one sentence on her roiling mind:

I know California like the back of my hand.

8. friend of the devil

Notes for the Chapter:

This one was for some reason very difficult to push out but I tried my best. Hope y'all are doing well.

Trigger warnings: light mentions of a past eating disorder and SMUTTTTTT. S M U T. Did I say smut ?

Enjoy!♥♥

Patricia is mid-lather in the motel shower when she hears a loud knock at the door.

Fuck. He's early. Really early.

She rinses off quickly, stream of lukewarm water coming to a stop. Wraps herself in a white motel towel, eyes searching the room for a bathrobe. There is none. No longer spoiled by Amy's fancy hotel service. There's another knock now, longer, detailed, tapping out an impatient rhythm. Sounds like angry jazz.

"Coming!" She hurries to the door, droplets running down her skin. "Calm *down* ." She opens the door and it's impossible not to gawk.

Billy the babe. Bronzed and shirtless, cigarette streaming smoke. Jean cut-offs hung low around his hips. Brows quirking up behind shades. He takes a quick drag and flicks his cigarette to the asphalt. Camaro reflecting rays behind him.

"Hey, princess." A sleazy grin appears like clockwork, aviators coming off to stare. "Need a lift?"

Her tongue is dry sandpaper. "Hi..."

"Well, shit," His hands lift to press against the doorframe, taking up space. Sultry-pale eyes run over her like if they could devour her whole they would. "Looks like I caught you at the perfect time."

She doesn't know what's happening because instead of scoffing, she's

slamming into him for a giant bear hug. Knocks the wind right out of him.

He grunts in surprise. “*Jesus*, Trish...” Strong arms hug her back just as tight. Hand cupping her wet head. “Rough day?”

He’s so warm. Smells so good. Holds her so sweetly. She’s choked out of nowhere, gratitude filling her up like a dam about to break. She jerks away from him, the electricity between them making her antsy. Almost nauseous. “Thanks for coming.” She backs up to let him in, clutching her towel to her like it’ll help.

“No problem, I’m into rescuing pretty damsels.” He steps inside. “Especially the wet ones.”

Patricia has no smart response, trying to maintain some type of normalcy despite the growing heat between her legs. Hard to do when they’re both barely clothed. Alone together again. “You’re super early. Did you speed the whole way here or something?”

He shrugs, focused intently. On her mouth, her breasts, her legs. “No faster than I usually drive.”

So he sped the whole way here.

“Sorry about your car.” He meets her eyes, voice softening. “Said it over the phone about a hundred times but I mean it.”

She gets a hit of sorrow. Mixes painfully with escalating desire. “Yeah, it’s surreal.”

There’s a press of silence as they survey each other. Tension nearly visible, electric bolts crackling white-hot between them. She can practically hear the cogs in his brain whir, deciding whether or not to make a move. To her dismay, she wants him to, her soul weary and needing release, warmth, strength. Wants him to push her to the floor, bend her over the Camaro, shove her onto the bed. Wants him to take her with everything he’s got. Right now. The idea alone makes her weak, almost sink to her knees. She needs to get it over with. Can’t take another second of torture.

“Know what else is surreal?” He senses her surrender. Seals the space

between them in a smooth step, arms pulling her close again. "Us being in this motel in the middle of nowhere."

She's tilting into him, her cheek grazing his, two magnets sucking together. "A little."

"Feels kind of destined, doesn't it?"

Maybe it does. She wants him so bad right now that *just friends* disappears from memory. *Restraint?* Must be a foreign language. Language itself seems stupid. "Destined...."

His mouth is poised near hers, alluring, almost laughing. Caught onto her longing before he even walked through the door. "Definitely."

Patricia can't control her next few movements. Explosive and jagged. Grabbing the back of Billy's head to kiss him hard. Him backing her up a few steps til her legs hit the bed. Her yanking him close as she falls back. His solid weight pushing her into the mattress, pinned under his skin, satiny-hot on hers.

"Wait." She has a moment of annoying awareness, palms pushing at his chest. "Your girlfriend?" No way she's going to be the other woman.

"Dumped me." Seems like he couldn't care less, whipping her towel open to look at her. Sound in his throat like he's struck gold, like she's the desert oasis he's been pining for. He lowers his hands and head to her breasts, squeezing her flesh, sucking at her nipples. A tender graze of teeth before he moves up to kiss her deep again, fingers slipping between her legs to find her hot and wet. He sighs. "Missed you, Trish."

It's so earnest her breath stops. His lips won't let her reply and for that she's grateful. She's not sure she can say it back, even as her heart jolts, shimmers.

He kisses a gentle trail down her throat, between her breasts, over her quivering belly. He spreads her legs wide. Lips pressing to her pubic mound before parting her wetness with his tongue. Makes her shudder with pleasure already, her fingers digging into his hair.

Strong arms wrap around her thighs while he licks and teases, man on a mission. Tongue flicking, sucking with uncanny efficiency, cunning fingers inside her.

A handful of minutes and she's coming in startling waves, thighs twitching, a warm, powerful glow up her spine. The sounds she's making aren't her. Some strange, cooing newborn. A feeling like being lovingly drowned, sunk deep with pleasure.

Soft. Everything's so soft and sheer and bright.

Billy teases the last ripples from her until she has to writhe away from him. "Yeah, baby, you fucking needed that, didn't you?" He moves up to give her a sloppy kiss. "Happy to help ease the pain."

For some reason that cuts like daggers. "The *pain*?"

"Your car?"

"Oh...right." Still cuts. She stretches out with a groan, sadness spiralling with fuzzy pleasure. "That was so good I actually forgot."

He grins at her praise. Bounds off the bed. "Welp. Time to hit the ol' trail."

That's unexpected. "You don't want...?"

"Later, baby. Gotta get home." He's across the room and at the door in a blink. "Plus I left my keys in the ignition."

"Billy!" If he were closer, she'd smack him upside the head. "Were you planning to get us *both* stranded?"

"Didn't expect a half-naked wet girl to answer the door. Got distracted." He gives her a wink, leaves her sprawled in lazy afterglow.

Takes a bit to get up, limbs not wanting to move. She puffs out a breath, frowning at the spotted-brown ceiling. Ugly. Dropped from heaven to this hideous place.

She sits up. Pauses at the edge of the bed, waiting to feel guilty.

It doesn't happen.

*

Patrica returns her room key to the front desk and circles back to the parking lot to find Billy leaning casually against the Camaro, placing a pink stick of gum in his mouth. She can't get over the hard lines of his torso highlighted by glaring sunlight. How he's always so effortlessly sultry and sun-kissed. She's tempted to thank him on her knees right here on the hard pavement.

She stops in front of him with a click of her tongue. "So you still hate shirts."

"I don't even get a free pass in the fucking desert?" He takes her duffel bag from her, turning to pop the trunk open.

"Just an observation." She watches his sturdy form making space for her stuff. "I'm cool with it."

"Oh goodie." He slams the trunk shut with a smirk. "Feel free to go shirtless as well."

"Can't go shirtless in a dress." Patricia motions over the baby blue cotton on her, rounding the car to the passengers seat.

"Dress-less is even better," Billy purrs. They both get inside the Camaro and again, it's overly warm. Overly sticky on the backs of her thighs. Even worse in the Mojave heat. He guns the engine and the car starts with a grumbling roar. "So what was it?"

"What was what?"

"Your car."

"Oh." She goes miserable again. "Purple 79' Dodge Aspen. Birthday gift from my aunt."

"*Shit* ." He starts backing out of the parking spot, glancing over his shoulder.

"I know."

"Hey, maybe you'll get lucky." He takes on a sympathetic tone. "Buddy of mine got his car back after it got stolen."

"I'm afraid to get my hopes up."

"Yeah, I'd feel the same. Rather only get let down once. Though if someone stole my baby, I think I'd have a mental breakdown." He pats the wheel with affection.

"You're witnessing a mental breakdown at this very moment." She wishes it sounded more like a joke. "So you're letting me pick the music again, right?" She's reaching under her seat already.

"Person with the stolen car always gets dibs."

"Let's not mention the car anymore, man. You're bumming me out."

"Too soon?"

"Yup, pretend I never had a car." Patricia drags a shoebox out from under her feet, places the heavy box on her lap. "Is this going to be less condom-y? I'm scared."

"Just music, Trish," he chuckles. "Nothing traumatic."

"Why did you direct me to the glove box last time when there was more condoms than tapes?"

"Thought you'd be into the Metallica album."

"I am. I like *Ride The Lightning* more though." Patricia skims through the selection, cassettes flicking under her fingers. "Oh man, you've got a lot of old school stuff here."

"Yeah, love that shit. Been awhile since I've listened to any of it though."

"So you keep to the glovebox," she muses. "Have you ever accidentally shoved a condom in the tape deck?"

Billy just laughs, reaching over to muss up her damp hair. She pushes his hand away with a whine.

“ Billy. Looks bad enough as it is.” Patricia smoothes down the mess, then continues the search. Touching over Led Zeppelin, The Kinks, The Doors, Jefferson Airplane. A plethora of 60’s and 70’s classic rock. “Huh, this is like the soundtrack to my childhood.”

“What do you feel like?”

“Something upbeat.” She finds Joni Mitchell right next to The Mama’s and The Papa’s. It just gets more unexpected. “It’s so weird you’re into this softer stuff too.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I can’t have layers?” Billy snorts. “Didn’t we just do an interview about this?”

“My bad. I’m sort of prejudiced about metalheads.” She grins at him. “Met too many of them.” She picks out a Rolling Stones tape and shows the cover to Billy.

“Out of all the Stones tapes I have, you choose *Tattoo You* ?” He glares at the cassette in her hands. “Arguably their worst album. Ashamed to own it. Why don’t you throw it out the window and I’ll run it over?”

“Hey, those that have dibs get no complaints.” She presses the tape in the deck. “Also, I just like the first track.”

The opening riff to “Start Me Up” lights up the car. Billy beams. “Oh *yeah* . The one redeeming song on this piece of shit.”

“Makes me think of my aunt.”

If you start me up, if you start me up, I’ll never stop

Billy snickers under his breath. “ I’m guessing you never actually listened to the lyrics?”

“To be honest, half the time I don’t hear them.”

“I thought you were the music journalist,” he tuts. She glows up at him calling her that.

I’ve been running hot, you got me ticking, going to blow my top

“Oh.” She gets it now. “Never even thought of it that way. We’d just dance around to it in the living room together.”

“Cute. Pretty sure this song is gonna make me think of you from now on though.” *You make a grown man cry, you make a grown man cry.* “Yup, definitely your song. This or “She’s So Cold”.”

Patricia rolls her eyes. “Yours can be “Beast Of Burden.”

“I was hoping for “Sympathy for The Devil”.”

“What about “Monkey Man”?”

He nods. “Alright, you’re cool again. Actually know some good ones.” *If you like it, I can slide it up, slide it up, slide it up.* “How the fuck did you not know what this song was about? Miss Innocent.” He extends a hand to squeeze her bare knee.

A spark runs up Patricia’s inner thigh. “We can’t *all* be dogs.”

Billy shoots her a lewd smile. Then he lets out a long, wicked howl, echoing loud into the desert air.

*

A half hour later they see a lone diner in the distance. *Elvira’s Burger n’ Shake Shack*. Square and squat and a glaring salmon-pink. Twisting and distorting behind heatwaves. Looks like a mirage. Too colourful to be real against all this dust.

“You hungry, Trish?” He asks so nicely.

Patricia pales. “I’m okay.” Truthfully, she hasn’t eaten since yesterday. Something she hasn’t done in a long time.

“Well, I’m starving.” He pulls over in the half-filled lot. Parks right next to the front door. He steps out and Patricia warily takes off her seatbelt to follow.

They walk to the entrance and she notices a sign taped to the glass door. *No shoes, no shirt, no service*. She points, giving Billy a cheeky look over her shoulder. “Think my bad luck’s rubbing off on you.”

“Shit,” Billy sighs. “They better have fuckin’ air conditioning.” He returns to the Camaro, takes a black t-shirt out of the backseat. Pulls it over his muscled torso with a scowl.

“Such *suffering* .”

“If I ran the world, everyone would walk around naked.” He opens the door for her. “Well, *you* definitely would.” Patricia catches his shoulder for a smack on the way in.

No air conditioning. They sit down in a sticky-hot booth. At least there’s a fan right across from them on the green diner counter.

“People seriously need to get with the program out here. Look at this dip-shit over there wearing a fucking suit.” He points behind her.

She glances at a business man in heavy tweed, shining sweat under his toupee. “He’s probably dying inside.”

“I hope so.”

“Think your tyrannical nudist agenda would last long if he had to get naked too?”

“I digress. Hotties only.” Billy scans the menu. “I’m gonna get a burger. How ‘bout you?”

“Uh...” This is always uncomfortable. A part of her is over this. Another part of her feels ashamed even looking at a menu. Remembers Ma swatting her hand away from everything. Telling her that her stomach growling was something to ignore, wasn’t real. That they can’t afford it. That pretty girls don’t need to eat. “I’m going to get the chicken salad.”

“Lame.”

They get their food and Billy devours his in minutes. Patricia takes slow, careful bites. Remembers meals where she’d gobble everything down with the full intention to purge later. Just like Ma would do whenever one of her boyfriends managed to feed them a good meal. Ma’s habits ingrained deep. Aunt Doris paid for therapy where over time she learned to eat normally, healthily. A few relapses in her

early twenties but overall she's recovered. Still, with unfamiliar people or in public, it's like a chess game. Every bite reveals too much.

Billy doesn't seem to notice. Why would he? She's eating, just slowly. She's overthink-

"Something on your mind?" Billy's hand covers hers.

"Huh?" His warm touch shocks her back into reality.

"You're zoning out on me again. Just asked if you wanted dessert."

"Oh." She blinks. "No thanks, I'm full. And I'm just tired, sorry."

"Yeah, that motel was shitty. Bet you didn't sleep a wink." He plays with her fingers. "You sure you don't want pie? I'm thinking strawberry-rhubarb."

"Nope, you go ahead." Patricia tries to change the topic. Blurts the first thing that comes to mind. "So what happened with you and your girlfriend?"

Probably not a great topic.

Billy gives a dismissive shrug, pulling his hand back. "Just didn't work out."

"That's too bad." She could not sound less sincere.

"Nah, we didn't have much in common."

"Not surprised." Patricia examines her cuticles. "Figured it was mainly a sex thing. That's your forte, right?" As soon as the catty words come out she wants to snatch them back. Nails scraping down chalkboard to her own ears.

"Wow. Here we fuckin' go." Billy's eyes pierce her, go heated. "Look, sweetheart. I gave you more than a few chances. If some other chick actually took the fucking chance, that's *your* problem. Not mine."

Nope, not a great topic. Horrible, horrible topic. "Sorry, that was

dumb of me. I didn't mean-

"-like, are we not adults here?" He leans towards her, voice lowering. "We weren't together. Not like I owed you my loyalty. I tried to make things happen and you ran. So don't give me that bitchy shit. I don't deserve it."

"I don't want to talk about this here, Billy." Patricia searches through her purse for cash. Slaps down a ten and slides out the booth, knowing full well he's right, feeling stupid for caring about him and his ever-prosperous sex life.

"Trish, you just got your car stolen. Let me fuckin' pay."

"I'm an adult, aren't I? I pay for my own shit." She turns and leaves the diner in a sad storm. Billy follows her into the hot car.

She doesn't feel like herself anymore, full of self-pity. Never been the type to bring up past lovers like that. She's become vindictive, suspicious, always assuming the worst. Feeling less-than even though she was the one that turned Billy down. Wants to have her cake and eat it too. Stupid.

He doesn't start the car. "You okay?"

"I don't know." She stares at the outer wall of Elvira's diner, arms folded. "Everything's fucked up."

"Hey, look at me." He touches her shoulder. She reluctantly looks at him straight on, throat all closed with tension. "You know *why* she broke up with me? It's because she took one look at us together that night and knew she couldn't touch us." He leans over, fingers moving up to skim her cheek. "She's right, you know. And I'm still into you, cold shoulder and all."

"I know. You picked me up in the middle of the fucking desert." She laughs and another wave of gratitude hits her, chest aching from it. She nudges into his hand, his thumb stroking down her cheek. "I don't get why though. I've been so flaky with you. Kind of a bitch."

"It's gonna take a lot more than that for me to stop wanting to be with you, Trish."

His honesty steals her breath away. Makes her go hot and cold and tense all at once. Want to rush towards him and run far, far away. "You barely know me, Billy. I only get more complicated."

"I don't give a fuck." Billy pushes forward to press his mouth to hers. She melts into him, into his kiss going tender, then dark with passion, ending soft and sweet as pie. He breaks it to nuzzle into her neck. "Glad you called me, even if it took a fuckin' robbery. Was so damn good to hear your voice out of nowhere."

Patricia can't say anything back. It's just not coming out. She nods and turns away from him, seat belt pulling on. Doesn't look to see if that offends him.

Billy guns the engine. Turns out of the parking lot, reaching over to take her hand in his. Pulls it to his mouth for a brief kiss before their twined fingers rest on her bare knee. They drive like that for a long time. No words. Warm skin-on-skin says more than enough.

*

The sun's just set into darkness when Billy parks outside Patricia's apartment. She feels about the same way she did last time they were here. Wants him bad, more than she can handle. And this time she's not going to hold back. She puts his hand on his thigh again, fingers gliding over the flex of muscle under rough fabric.

"I wanna give you something. For your generosity."

A pink tongue glides over grinning teeth. "Do I get a cookie?"

"Something better." Patricia plants her mouth on his, palming the bulge under his zipper. There's no build-up, just stark need. His fingers tangle in her hair to cup her scalp. His other hand running up her stomach, slipping beneath her dress collar, feeling her breasts under her bra. Not gently. Rough and hungry. Calloused fingers digging into her sensitive flesh.

Patricia opens his zipper, no briefs to block his cock from her stroking hand. Rock-hard and wet at the tip. She leans down and Billy swears as she takes his dripping head into her mouth. Tongue

swirling for a moment before she sucks him deep.

“Holy *fuck* .” Billy’s breath comes out in shallow pants. He pulls her hair back, watching her move. Hand leaving her breasts to skim up her inner thighs, feeling the overflow of heat and glossy-wetness between her legs. She hums with pleasure, lips and tongue sinking down his shaft. He groans back at the buzzing sensation, ecstasy lapping between them like waves.

The air in the car goes muggy. Windows fogging fast and steamy as she bobs at a steady pace, hand wrapping firm around his shaft. Moving in time with the breaths he’s trying to steady, with his fingers flirting inside of her. Takes all her focus to not get distracted by the mounting pleasure.

“Trish, do you wanna-” He gasps as she sucks harder, ups the pace. “This is amazing, you’re amazing, I just-” She swallows him whole, deep down her throat. “ *Shit* , I need to fuck you.”

Patricia pops her head up, gives him a wet kiss before she whispers in his ear. “Come inside?” That makes him grab her tight, his tongue gliding along hers.

Billy rips his mouth away. “Abso-fuckin-lutely.” He forces his hands from her. Adjusts his zipper and is out the door in a second. She climbs out after him and he grabs her hand, dragging her towards the apartment.

*

The elevator’s broken. They take the stairwell. Takes forever to walk up because Billy keeps pressing her into the wall at every landing. Grinding against her. Hands and mouths moving in a needy tumult.

When they reach the fourth landing, he pushes her against the wall, grabbing her ass. Lifts her and yanks her thighs up around his waist. She squeals, giggling like some virginal schoolgirl.

“You ever been fucked here before?” Sharp teeth nip at her ear, voice gravelly. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, baby. Right here, nice and hard.” He adjusts her so she’s right against his bulge. “Wanna get

fucked, dirty girl?”

She licks into his mouth, caught up in the fantasy. He ruts his hips into her and the pressure hits her perfectly, drawing out a moan. A hand moves between them and she hears his zipper open. “Billy-” Fingers quickly push her panties aside, the head of his cock nudging her-“Wait! Not here.”

He stops.

“No?” he chuckles against her earlobe. Breathless with lust.

“People *use* these stairs,” she pants. “I run into Mrs. Morris here like everyday. I’d never be able to look her in the eye again.”

He rests his head against the wall behind her, dick still paused at her entrance. “The risk is half the fun.”

“Not as freaky as you are, man. I wanna fuck in my bed.”

Billy takes a deep breath before surrendering. “Alright, I wanna fuck in your bed too.” He sets her down on the floor, does up his zipper. “I mean, I wanna fuck you all over this building but your bed sounds just *lovely* .” He kisses her damp forehead.

Patricia grins up at him, adjusting her dress. “I dunno about lovely...”

“Kinda bummed your elevator broke though. Woulda been hot. Does it have mirrors?”

“Have you entered your name for Pervert of the Year yet?” She makes a move to go up the stairs but he grabs her fast. Hoists her over his shoulder, her rear in the air. Dress pushed up around her waist from the rough motion, fabric trapped under her ribs.

“Billy!” She squirms. “What the fuck!” She smacks at his back, his firm ass, quickly finding it’s not an effective way to resist. Seems to only excite him more.

He snickers like a mischievous little boy, strong legs vaulting up the stairs. “What floor?”

“Five!” Blood rushes to her head, dizzy laughter pouring out her mouth. “Billy!”

“ *Shhh*, don’t wanna disturb the neighbours, do we?” He takes two steps at a time until he’s on the fifth floor. Kicks the door open to get into the hall.

“Everyone’s gonna see my ass!” Her panties are riding up too, bare flesh exposed to warm air.

“Lucky bastards.” Billy gropes a cheek for good measure. “Mmm, that is *nice* . Do you work out?”

“Remind me to kill you later.”

“Lemme fuck you first and it’s a deal, baby.” Thick fingers push beneath her underwear, play at her slick. “What room?”

“508.” She manages to croak. Squirming to no avail as they approach her door, getting more turned on with every step.

“504...506...uh...” He makes a hard stop. Sharp. Patricia can feel his muscle tense under her. “ *Fuck*. ”

“What is it?” His change of tone makes the hair on her nape stand up.

Billy sets her on her feet in one abrupt movement. “Your door’s open.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for all your comments! They really help me push this baby out!

9. salt water

Notes for the Chapter:

I stared at this til words had no meaning so I guess it's done now lol.

Smut ahead!

January 14 1987,

“Do you like it?”

Patricia stares in the mirror at the brand-new necklace adorning her throat. A gold and sapphire choker. More expensive than any piece of jewellery she's ever owned. “I love it.” She spins around to hug the handsome boyfriend behind her. “I don't get what the special occasion is, but I love it.” She kisses him on his perfectly shaped nose.

“No occasion needed for you, doll. With you...every day is special.”

Patricia looks deep into hazel eyes, heart melting into syrup. “You're too good to me, Derek.”

“You know what I thought when I first met you?” Derek pulls her into him and they sway to a soundless beat. “I thought, this is a girl that needs someone to be sweet with her. Treat her right. I want to be sweet to you, Pat.”

Patricia takes his hand in hers. Guides them to sit on her living room sofa. Squeezed side by side, lovebirds brushing wings.

“Hey, I've got a new song I want to show you.” Derek reaches over for his glossy-auburn acoustic. “A little blues number.”

“Blues? Thought you said you were a metal only guy.”

“The metal scene here is dead, Pat.” Derek scoffs. “Soulless glam shit. Now blues is *real* music. It's about suffering. What life is really all about.”

Patricia bites back critique about that last statement. "That's why I like the scene out here. It's fun. Everyone just wants to have a good time."

Derek strums a sloppy chord, dripping condescension. "Life isn't just rainbows and unicorns, you know. Real shit happens."

"...I know."

"Check this out." He proceeds to play her an out-of-tune, wailing monstrosity. So off-tempo and striving that he's actually endearing. She wants to lean over and hug him close for his effort. Trying so damn hard. "So, what do you think?"

"I love it. Blues is definitely your genre."

"Really?" He looks so hopeful.

"Really."

Derek smiles pretty at her. She kisses his sculpted cheek.

"I want to show you something too." Patricia reaches into her purse and takes out the newly minted zine, burning with excitement.

Derek takes the magazine from her. Reads the title aloud. "*Live Wire...featuring Ozzy Osbourne.*" He sets it down on the table without a second glance. "Interesting. I thought you were going to be doing the journalist thing. You know, *real* journalism."

Eagerness fades into hurt. "This... is the journalist thing."

Brown-green eyes roll at her. "Pat. Come *on* . You're not going to go anywhere with this stuff. You should be applying for women's magazines. Fashion. Beauty. Much more up your alley."

Irritation seeps into her voice. "This *is* my alley. I go to these shows every week."

"I don't like you going out like that either." Derek picks moodily at strings. "The only reason why anyone's talking to you is because you look like you. It's not a good scene, Pat. Trust me, been there."

He *tried* to be there. No band wanted him.

“People send me letters saying they love it. That they want more.”

“Patricia, listen to me.” A paternal tone chides silly notions from her head. “My dad could probably help get you a job at Vogue or Cosmopolitan or something. Give you a nice reference.”

“I dunno, Derek. I really don’t feel drawn to that.”

“-although, if you worked at one of those magazines, you’d have to move to New York. Which would be *perfect*.”

“It would?”

“Why don’t we ditch this stupid L.A scene? It’s just a bunch of sleaze. No one really cares about authentic music. New York.” He twangs a string with flourish. “Now *that’s* where things are really happening.”

New York. The Big Rotten Apple where she was found unwashed, unfed and lice-ridden. “But I like it here...”

“Also, I’m sick of this intern gig. Dad hangs all over me, telling me what to do. It’s just a bunch of paperwork and coffee fetching. Beneath me.”

“I know the feeling.” She thinks of her desk job from hell. Of being leered at and mocked and underestimated.

“This is why we’ve got to get us the hell out of here, Pat.”

Patricia drops a hand on his knee, cautionary. “We’ll see.”

Derek reaches an arm around her shoulders. “Have you thought of modelling? Swimsuits maybe? Think you’d do much better in that arena.”

“I really don’t think so.”

He cuddles into her. “You can model that little black dress I got you...”

"Maybe later." She smiles and kisses him into silence. Wanting to escape this disappointing conversation.

Derek slowly works her into the couch. Necking her with a fever, keeps calling her his special doll, his prize, heating her up even through her let-down. Patricia slides fingers down his hips, moves to feel the bulge in his jeans.

Not the one she was looking for.

She reaches inside his pocket and pulls out a tiny baggie of white powder. Holds the soft plastic between them. "I thought you said you'd never keep your own stash."

"It's just a few lines worth, Pat. No big deal." He gives her a reassuring peck on the cheek.

She slips the baggie back in his pocket. "Sorry. Sometimes I stress over nothing."

"Let me help you relax." Derek pushes a hand up her shirt. Patricia gasps.

"Derek! Your hands are *freezing*."

"Are they?" Fingers slide along the line of her bra, find their way over her breast.

"Ah!" She pushes his hand away. "Icicles."

"It's probably because I've just been sitting around with you all day. Need to get my circulation going." He rolls off her to stand up. Starts doing jumping jacks, smiling wide and sunny at her.

"You're ridiculous," she laughs.

He drops to the carpet for push ups. "All for you." He gives her twenty. Then returns to run his hand over her bare belly. "How about now?"

"Ah..." Goosebumps rise to her nape as he pulls up her skirt. " *Still* cold."

"I guess you'll have to warm me up." Derek brushes little kisses all over her face, breath getting shorter as he gets hotter. Sharp pants in her ear as he suddenly rabbits between her thighs. His zipper and belt buckle hurt through her underwear and she says nothing. "I love it when pretty dolls warm me up. Want to be my pretty toy tonight?" He's overly-breathless and sweaty as he undoes his jeans. Getting off on his usual power trip, becoming more and more elaborate lately. "Want to be dressed up and fucked the way a perfect little doll should?"

Patricia ignores the way her body seizes up cold, reminds herself that she should feel lucky this dark dreamboat is on top of her at all. She lets him fuck her into the couch, each thrust stinging. Opens her soft, fragrant body to him while he gives rough grunts in return. Keeps her mouth shut because darling Derek doesn't take advice.

"I love you," she says as he leaves a mess inside her.

"I love you *more*." A hand digs into the fine hair at her scalp. Pulls so blue eyes water. "More than anyone ever will."

*

August 29, 1987

Patricia shoves past Billy, anger coiling inside her to strike. "Derek?"

She crosses the threshold and a ripple of terror goes through her like waves from an atom bomb. Her apartment is a disaster scene. TV crashed to the ground, screen shattered. Sofa turned over, it's carcass peeking behind the wall corner. Table and bookshelf pushed and flower vase tipped. Glass smashed. Dead flowers spilled to the floor.

"Jesus fucking Christ..." Billy says behind her.

Patricia turns the corner into the living room and goes rigid. On the wall, behind the overturned couch, *BITCH* spraypainted in giant crimson letters, bleeding all the way to the floor. Seeping like wine into the carpet.

"Derek..." Is all she can say, hands over her mouth. Numb. "Derek.."

"Shit," Billy mutters under his breath.

Patricia rushes to the bathroom next. *SLUT* painted there too across the pristine white shower curtain. "I can't believe you..." She watches her lips move in shards of mirror on the tile.

She hears Billy swear from her bedroom and hauls her stunned body there to find Derek's most dedicated handiwork.

Over the bed they once shared is *WHORE* written in more blood-red. Scribbled thick, like he went over the word a dozen times. Paint drooling onto her sheets. "I hate you...I hate you...." A mantra that pools into her mouth like bitter spirits. Rolls right off her tongue. "I hate you."

"Fuckin hell, Trish." Billy has a hand on her shoulder. "I'll beat the goddamn tar outta him, the sick fuck. Guessin' this is your ex?"

Patricia nods dumbly. Trudges to the bed and the scent of urine hits her nostrils. Deep yellow splash over the white sheets. She cringes, can't stop muttering, hissing. "I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. I can't *believe* you."

She doesn't know how long she just stares at the drippy scarlet lettering, whispering curses under her breath. Billy's gone from the room but Patricia can hear his voice murmur through the wall. She peeks around the doorway and he's hanging up her phone.

"Just called the cops."

"Won't help." She stands listlessly.

"Won't help?"

She shrugs. "Derek's dad works for the state or something. Some big shot. Got him out of trouble for drug stuff more than once."

Billy runs a hand through his hair with a heavy breath. "Well, shit. I dunno, better than nothing?"

"I guess-" Patricia stops. Notices something she missed at first. Something special. Derek's guitar case leaning elegantly against the

wall. "Derek, you stupid fucking idiot." She makes a beeline, snaps open the case. Sees his prized instrument, orange-bronze, worth thousands of dollars. He must have been high off his ass to leave this behind. "You stupid, spoiled cokehead."

"Trish-"

Patricia removes the guitar from the case and marches to the center of the living room. "Derek, you fucking *moron*." She lifts the guitar by the handle with two hands and smashes it into the rickety coffee table. So hard that both the table and guitar break open, her wrists and hands hurting from the impact. She stands over the wreckage, staring at wooden smithereens, trembling. "I hate you..."

"Hey." Billy walks cautiously over to her. Pulls her shaking into his arms. "You can stay at my place, alright? Long as you need."

She nods slowly, vacant. "It's not him you know."

"What's not him?"

"This. It's not him. It's the coke. It made him go...bad."

"No, Trish." Billy shakes his head. "I mean, I know what it's like to be a paranoid spaz on that shit. But this?" He gestures around him to bloody walls. "No fucking way. There was something sick inside him to begin with. Don't fucking defend this asshole."

"He doesn't know any better." Her chin trembles. "He's naive about stuff-"

"A fucking *child* knows better." Billy keeps hugging her, her cheek nuzzled in his chest. "Hey, it's okay. We'll get him, Trish. We'll get him back. If the cops don't, I sure as hell will."

She's barely listening, muttering to himself. "Should've gotten back his copy of the key. So stupid of me. What's wrong with me?"

"Stop saying shit like that. It's not you, okay? It's him. It's all fucking *him*."

Patricia stays silent, doesn't believe a word. She knew better.

Cops come by in a stream of blue and dust for prints without batting a lash. Just another night in the city of angels. They ask a list of routine questions. She answers, knowing it will all amount to nothing. Stands there in a half-hysterical daze, staring at bloody letters oozing. Wondering if this is where it all stops or begins.

*

“Salt. I need salt.”

Patricia’s searching frantically through Billy’s cupboards as he sits on the counter behind her. She can feel him questioning her sanity as she shoves bags of oatmeal and dried fruit aside. Spice rack spinning. Boxes of instant coffee and brown sugar thudding to the countertop.

“Did you want to make something or...?”

“Found it.” Patricia takes the box of salt to the front entrance. Opens the door. Tears open the container and begins pouring across the threshold.

“Uh, sweetheart? What the hell are you doing?”

She stops, stares at the snow-white trail. “My aunt says it’s good for protection.”

“You’re wasting my fucking salt, Trish. You’re safe here. Don’t worry.”

There’s no way he knows that for sure. Patricia spins to give him a stony glare. “Look, I know this seems insane but if I don’t do it I won’t be able to sleep.”

Billy drops from the counter to lean against the wall beside her. “Pour the whole damn box if you need to.”

“Thank you.” Patricia doesn’t stop until every grain is on the floor. Sighs in relief, pressure off her chest as she shuts the door closed.

“I fuckin’ *hate* this motherfucker.” Billy seethes through his teeth. His sudden intensity sends a shock through her. “So fucking wrong. Swear to god, I’m gonna-”

“Don’t.” She raises a forefinger at him. “I told you in the car. No talking about him. I really, really, really don’t want to talk about him.”

“Kinda hard not to. The guy’s a goddamn lunat-” Billy sees her scowl and pauses. “Sorry, I’ll stop.”

Patricia places the salt box on the counter, walks across the room to sit on Billy’s big bed. Lays flat on her back and just breathes, looking around the low-lit apartment. Sees delicate seashell wind-chimes hanging, colorful framed posters for Black Sabbath, Dick Dale, Van Halen. For *Apocalypse Now*, *Videodrome*, *Escape From New York*. A pale blue surfboard tucked nicely in the corner. “You decorated.”

“Just got the rest of my stuff from storage.” Billy sits down next to her. “Anything I can do?”

Her voice comes out frail and brittle. “...hold me?”

Billy stretches out on the bedspread, moonglow pooling blue-white onto his skin as he takes her in his arms. They lay there in silence.

After a while, Patricia turns into him, kisses his neck, his cheek, his jawline. Curls into his body in the dark like he’s all the light there is. She slips a hand under his shirt. Strokes suggestively down his stomach, grazes fingers along his jean zipper.

“You sure? Maybe-”

“Never been more sure.”

He cups her face in his palms and kisses her so tenderly she can’t believe it’s the same jerk she woke up next to a month ago. Hands firm and strong and steady down her hips, smoothing under her dress to help her out of soaked panties, sweeping her dress over her head. Lips grazing her shoulder, her throat, behind her ear.

“Need you inside me.” A plea that rings desperate.

Billy pulls off his shirt, kicks off his shorts. Blankets his hard body over her softness. Presses tongue and mouth and heat to her as he slowly enters. She’s clutching to him, legs twined around his waist so

he can bury himself. His hips move and it sets her on fire. Not much needed to ignite.

His thrusts are slow, powerful. Hips angling just so, heated whispers in her ear. Wrangling pleasure from deep inside her for so long she loses track of time and space. Then something overpowering brews, a sensation that spreads molten bliss up her spine and behind her navel. She clenches around him, gasping.

He pushes her thighs back, stroking against the spot inside that makes her feel near-death, paralyzed with feeling, her loud response not going unnoticed. "You gonna come if I keep doing that?"

"Yes," Rainbow light bursts behind her eyelids, crystalline colors swirling. "Yes. Oh my god , Billy-"

He keeps pace, a little faster now. "You're so fuckin' beautiful..."

"Deeper..."

"Yeah, you like how I fill you up, sweetheart?" He sinks all the way in, barely containing his own pleasure, raspy breaths at her throat. "Feel good?"

Patricia can't answer because she's coming. Ocean waves crashing into rock, turquoise and sparkling in cascades. Her release finishes him, spilling hot and deep into her. She holds him tight. Grips him hard enough to leave bruises before muscles liquify, body seeping into blankets. Feels like she could flow right onto the floor.

The world gently spins as her senses piece back together. Billy's bulk pleasantly crushing her into his mattress. Golden hair on her cheek, his skin burning against hers. Their ragged breaths heaving. And then, for the first time tonight, she hears the hypnotic lap of the sea.

"I won't let him hurt you." He finally says in her ear. "Nobody's going to hurt you."

Eyes well up at that and his thumb strokes the warm damp from her cheek. "Patricia..."

She bursts over like a summer storm, like ocean rain, salt water and

sweet. A soft mourning from her throat. Dissolving. He doesn't say anything to ease or distract. Just holds her. Lips at her temple, her damp lashes. Her salty-wet mouth. Stays nestled inside her until he goes soft, pulling out to roll away.

Fingers tighten on his shoulders, keep him still. "Stay..."

"I'm here." He takes her hand and places it flat on his heart. "See? Not going anywhere."

She enfolds him in her arms and they don't move until tears have dried. Until ocean waves soothe her to half sleep.

"Hey," Billy eventually shifts above her, dazed blue eyes meeting hers. "How you holdin' up?"

"Better," she sniffs. "A lot better."

"Good." He lifts off her with a long exhale, moves to plop his head on the pillow. "*Shit*, girl. Fuckin' wrecked me." Lips graze her cheek and she smiles.

"That was..." Patricia settles on a word that doesn't do justice, "wow."

"And we've only just begun." That promise seeps like honey into blood. Billy drapes an arm across her stomach, a leg linking around her calf. "You wanna sleep now?"

"Actually," Her knuckles brush down his forearm. "Can we go somewhere?"

Billy yawns contentedly. "Where?"

"Down to the ocean. I really want to see the moon on the water."

"Sure. I'll walk you down." He gives a hearty stretch, releasing a satisfied groan. "Just gimme a minute to feel my legs again."

"You stole my line."

"You're not the only one that turns to jelly after sweet, sweet love-

making like that.” He flashes a lazy smile. “Angels singin’ and whatnot. Dancin’. Noisy fuckers.”

Patricia breaks into laughter, one hand giving his chest a playful shove. “You’re so corny.”

Billy meshes fingers with hers. “You have no idea.”

*

The walk down to shore is balmy and quick, ten minutes of miraculously uncrowded strolling. Patricia lets Billy hold her hand the whole way there, brain and body too tired to object. Not wanting to pull back from the comfort anyway.

When feet meet pearl-grey sand, Patricia kicks off her sandals. Finds herself sucked towards the shoreline. Bare feet get swallowed by waves, ankles immersed in shiny-black ripples. Moonbeams and the neon glare from the distant pier making a light-show on the water.

“Beautiful night, huh?” Billy lights a Marlboro by her side.

“Yeah...” She squats down, puts her hands in the sea too. The bottom of her dress gets wet but she doesn’t care. “Perfect.”

“Like I said, water’s good for you.”

Memories of the nightfall surfers she saw at this very spot from the pier swim back to her. “I wanted to ask you when we were on the ferris wheel. Have you...ever surfed at night?”

Billy nods around his cigarette. “Yeah, wouldn’t recommend it though.”

“No?”

“I mean, I would. But I won’t. Dangerous for newbies. For anyone really.”

“How do you even do it without being able to see?”

“Well, for one, you’d only go on a night like this. You need *some*

kinda light. Moon's good for that." He pauses for a moment. Then chuckles remembering. "One time, back in high-school, Dave and I made a trip up to this hidden spot-

"Dave surfs too?"

"Hell yeah, better than me." Billy takes a lengthy drag of smoke. "Better at everything, really. Kinda glad he never got into drumming. Anyways, there's this secret spot up in Ventura. We surfed it a bunch of times in daylight first to get a feel for the waves, then we drove out there on the full moon. Surfed for hours in the dark. Lost my board like five times. Kinda scary, had to keep searching for the reflection of the moon on the board to find it. If I lost that, I'd be screwed. Shit's expensive."

"Sounds...kind of fun."

"It is." Billy smiles. "In a fucked up, don't-ever-do-it kinda way. Smashed my leg open on coral. Bled everywhere. Dave of course was unblemished, lucky fucker."

Every word of peril only makes it sound more exciting. "Maybe one day I'll try." She stands up and flicks water from her fingers. "You can show me the ropes."

"Uh..." He drapes an arm over her shoulders. "Let's see how you fare in the daylight first."

They walk down the shoreline, sandals in her hand. Seaweed and waves skimming bare toes. "Do you like it here in L.A, Billy? More than San Fran?"

"To be honest-" He shrugs reluctantly. "-it's a mixed bag. You're one of the better parts. Other parts...not so much."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone's a fucking glamour-puss *douchebag*," he snorts. "Well, not everyone but more than enough. Also, the scene's more hair metal than I'd prefer. Like, Dave and I were playing way heavier venues for years before this. Feel sorta outta place."

“But people love you guys. You’re blowing up so fast.”

“Yeah, but we’re not trying to be Poison or whatever. Not gonna put on fucking lipstick. Nick’s kinda eager to go in that direction though.”

“Your singer.” Unpleasant images of finding him peaking in The Doghouse bathroom rise up.

“He’s...” Billy pauses. “Well, he’s Nick.”

That speaks volumes. “Rock and roll ego?”

“Always late to practice, if he even shows up at all. High as fuck all the time. Takes the lyrics Dave writes then leaves like he doesn’t need to be there for the actual playing. Can’t stand it.”

“Intervention time?”

“Might have to happen. That’ll be interesting.” They begin the journey back towards Billy’s place, slow due to limbs clinging. “You know what gave me hope about the scene though? This new band that just got signed. Guns and Roses. You know em, right? They’re definitely about to hit it big.”

Patricia flashes back to her interview with their top-hatted guitarist months ago. “I’ve heard there’s a bunch of drama behind the scenes with those guys.”

“Yeah, saw a glimpse of that backstage at our last show. But they’re really good. Less glam, more raw. Their lead singer’s a fucking asshole though. Reminds me of another certain singer that shall remain nameless...”

Billy’s harping on Nick worries her. Tensions bubbling so early since the move here. “You guys are way, way better.” The honest-to-god truth in her eyes. To her eardrums.

“We’re good. But we don’t have that...thing. That special something.”

“*You* do.” Patricia looks into his moonlit gaze, pale blue skies lightening the darkness. Gets a violent urge to kiss him. “Has anyone told you you’re kinda dreamy?”

Billy beams a grin back, squeezes her tighter to him. “An actual *compliment*? From *Trish*? Was starting to think I was ugly.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m a stud.” That earns a laugh. “Hey, I was thinking. Do you work tomorrow? Sunday?”

“No. Not til Monday.”

“Why don’t we head down to the hardware store tomorrow morning and get some paint? Clean up your place.”

WHORE slashes across her vision in bright red. “You don’t have to, I can do it myse-”

“Nope.” Billy shakes his head. “I’m not gonna let you clean up that shithead’s mess alone. You’ll have to fight me.”

“I’d kick your ass, man.”

“Bet you would. Still gonna help you.”

“Fine. You get to do the all the hard stuff.”

Lips press to her cheek, warming her to the soles of her feet in the cool Pacific breeze. “We’ll make things right as rain again, Trish. Good as new.”

*

Back in Billy’s bed, after another ecstatic session of being kissed and filled, Patricia lies naked under crisp sheets. Spent, descending into dreamland, drained of all tension. Billy shifts next to her in the dark before he spasms with a sharp inhale.

“Ow. The fuck?”

“What?” Patricia stirs groggily.

He squirms before glassy-hard stone presses against her skin. “Why is there a fucking rock in my bed?”

“Oh. Sorry.” She takes Auntie Doris’s black tourmaline from him.
“For protection.”

“You’re...a special case, Trish.” He rubs her arm with a snort.

“*Whatever*, dude. Thank me later when we’re not robbed or murdered. These stones work. I think.”

He laughs, kisses her chin like she’s cute. “You know, that reminds me. I gotta different Stones song that’s much more you.”

“What’s that?”

He noses into her jawline, singing throaty and low. “*She’s like a rainnnnbowwww...*”

Patricia dissolves into sleepy giggles, eyelids heavy. “You’re *such* a cheeseball.”

“Just the tip of the iceberg, baby. *She comes in colors everywhere, she combs her hair...*”

“Billy,” She kisses lips to his to stop the warbling. “I’m tired.”

“I was *trying* to serenade you to sleep,” he chuckles, pulling her to him. “Night, Trish.”

“Goodnight.”

“Trish?”

“Uh-huh?”

“You’re safe now.” He holds her as she fades. “I’ve got you.”

Patricia cuddles into his chest, inhales tobacco and traces of honeyed cologne. Lets herself believe fairytales and unicorns are real tonight. Lets pretty words wash over before the curtain drops.

Reality can wait until morning.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for your comments/kudos! ❤️ 🍀

10. the dirt

Notes for the Chapter:

Took a breather to regain my brain but I'm back now.

Mild description of substance use in this one.

The next morning, Patricia takes a shower. Anxious and fretting, steam heat no reprieve from mental torture. The stolen car was bad enough, but the apartment being trashed just plain hurts. Every time she closes her eyes she sees red streaming down walls. Imagines Derek on a bloodthirsty rampage, smashing glass, pissing gleefully on their bed. He must be wondering where his guitar is now. Fuck, she needs to change the locks-

The shower curtain whips open with a loud crack.

“Yo, what did you want for breakfast?” Billy stands there in just his briefs, taking a good moment to ogle. “Oh *hey*. Need some company, baby?”

Patricia rinses out shampoo, annoyed at privacy invaded. “Closed the door for a reason.”

“Thought you might need some help. You know, for those hard to reach places...” A hand streaks towards a wet breast. Patricia swats him away.

“You’re such a *perv*.”

“Didn’t seem to mind last night.” Blonde curls go damp as he leans in. She notes his growing bulge. “Want me to soap you up? Looks like you missed a spot.”

“No. Go away.”

Billy’s eyes narrow into slits. “Did they have to chisel you out of ice when you were born?”

"Were you conceived on a porn set?" The curtain snaps shut.

"I wish." Billy grumbles behind sheer plastic. "So what did you want for breakfast? Oatmeal?"

"Doesn't matter to me."

"Good, 'cause that's all I've got."

"Why did you come in here to ask me then?"

"Take a wild guess." Billy breaks out into song as he exits. "*I'm so hot for her and she's so cold...*"

*

"What a fucking nightmare." Billy steps over the shattered glass in Patricia's living room. "Didn't even notice the psycho broke your window last time." He gestures to the spiderwebbing cracks on the pane.

Her apartment is even more brutal in daylight. Last night it could have just been a bad dream, her moon-crazed imagination. Now it's sharp as glass, twinkling crystal-clear. Patricia grabs a broom with a sigh. Sweeps broken china and bruise-brown petals across the kitchen tile.

Billy lifts her couch back onto its heels. "Did he steal everything off your walls too?"

"No." She stops sweeping. "Why?"

"Sorta bare in here." Billy glances at white-walled emptiness, at the drool of scarlet letters. "Well, besides the Frida print." He points to the hallucinatory Kahlo painting over her destroyed TV. Feet emerging from bathtub brine. "Did you just move in?"

"A year ago." She gets a pang of anxiety at her insides being seen. Her barrenness.

"You some kinda minimalist?"

“Yeah. Don’t like having too much stuff. Why bother when I’m going to have to move again anyways?”

“Sorta helps it feel like home...”

“Home’s inside, not outside. Learned that growing up.” Not that she’s found home inside either. “Stuff just weighs you down, makes it harder to leave.”

“Did you move around a bunch?” Billy opens a black garbage bag for her. She discards ruins in there.

“My mom was...kind of an adventurer.” She continues her wistful sweep. “Nomadic. Must have lived in about fifteen different homes before I turned ten. Maybe more. Never settled in anywhere.”

“Damn, that’s a lot. What about school?”

“Those changed like the seasons.” She empties another dustpan. “It’s a miracle I made it through grade school at all.”

“Nah, you’re too smart to slip through the cracks. Gotta steel-trap mind.”

“Thanks.” Patricia doesn’t bother adding that she skipped a grade. Got into University early with a big scholarship. “It all worked out in the end.”

After they clear the debris from the living room and bathroom, the dreaded painting of her bedroom wall ensues. Patricia feels a rush of sadness when they pull her urine-stained bed back from the wall. When she approaches the red dribbles of *whore*, paint-roller in hand.

“By the way,” Billy lays down orange tarp. “Dave’s coming over with a spare mattress for you.”

“Oh.” Patricia balks. “You told him?” She doesn’t want Dave to see the pandemonium that is her life right now. Far too humiliating.

“Yeah, called him while you were in the shower. Thought you’d want a different one after-”

"I would prefer if he didn't see all of this." She motions a hand around the disaster zone. "You could have asked me first."

"Dave's cool." Billy assures. "He won't judge, I promise."

"Fine." Patricia decides to let this one go. Dips her roller head in eggshell-white paint. "Suppose that's extra nice of him to bring that here. He always seems like a real sweetie."

"And me?" Billy purrs expectantly.

"Keep trying." She rolls white over scarlet. Wants to cover the cruel word as soon as possible.

Dave arrives just as she paints over the E, the blare of a car horn and the painfully loud chorus of "Livin' on A Prayer" announcing his arrival. Makes her smile because she loves that song.

"Asshole." Billy rolls his eyes at Bon Jovi blasting. "Tell the guy you hate a song once and it's all he'll fuckin' play."

Billy proceeds to burst onto the balcony, flipping Dave the bird before he cups two hands around his mouth. Releasing a primitive howl towards the street. Dave cuts the music and emerges from a navy-blue van with an answering whoop. Two strange creatures with their own absurd language.

"Weirdos." Patricia looks through the gap in the broken window. Watching Dave's dark mane of curls catch sun as he opens the van's back doors. Notices his skin looks three shades browner since she last saw him.

Billy's left the room to assist, speeding downstairs to walk across the street. Dave catches his hand for a high five and they chat for a few moments below. Then they lift a queen-sized mattress towards her apartment.

The boys arrive and Patricia hears them murmur through the bedroom wall. Hushed conversation about the graffiti, the splintered window, the hell that will be paid.

"Special delivery." Dave's head pops into her room, one end of the

mattress in his hands. Breathing heavy from five flights.

“Hey you!” Patricia brightens at that friendly face. “Thanks for bringing this. That’s so nice of you.”

Dave helps Billy lean the mattress against the wall. “No prob, girl. It was just hanging around anyways.” Walks over to sweep her into his arms for a sweaty hug. Nearly cuts her air off. “Whoever this asshole is, he doesn’t deserve you.”

She pats Dave’s back, both touched and embarrassed he cares. “Thanks, hun.”

“Billy’s going to beat him to a bloody pulp so...at the very least you can look forward to that.”

Patricia laughs. “So he’s told me.” She takes a step backwards to check out his glow. “You’re looking extra bronze, dude.”

“Just got back from Maui. Surfed all day, partied all night. Brought this Puerto Rican skin to life, I’m tellin’ ya.” The tropical sun shines out his boyish grin.

“Aw, well you look great, sweetie.” She gives him another embrace. He’s just too adorable.

“Alright you two.” Billy claps Dave on the shoulder, side-eyeing their gooey rapport. “Come on, help me get this gross shit outta here.”

“You get the nasty side.” Dave and Billy lift the stained mattress off the bed-frame. “I’m gonna help with that ass-kicking by the way. No one puts me through this without a fight.”

“You’ve never kicked an ass in your goddamn life, amigo.” Billy grunts as they carry the floppy weight across the room. “Can’t even throw a punch.”

“Hair-pulling does it’s fair share of damage.”

The exchange happens smoothly. The dirty bed set outside the apartment building near the dumpster. The new mattress laid down nice and neat. A few more coats of matte white and it’s like nothing

ever happened. Only the scent of drying paint to signify the change.

“So, you guys are coming to the beach bonfire tonight?” Dave slants against one of the dry walls.

“Shit.” Billy has a moment of realization. “Totally forgot about that.”

“Sunday night rebels, huh?” Patricia raises a brow. “Metal-heads party too hard.”

“It’ll be chill. I gotta be up at six tomorrow. Catering gig.” Dave cocks his chin towards her. “You should come, Trish.”

Patricia can’t help but notice the nickname. Used by only one other person in her life. Does Billy talk to him about her? If so, how much? Butterflies swarm at the thought.

She takes a moment to consider. “Well, if you guys aren’t going too nuts I don’t see why not. Haven’t been to one in forever.”

“It’s a frequent thing for us.” Dave says. “Hard to get the smoke out though. Swear it takes like ten showers to get the smell off me, then it’s back again next week anyway.” Doe eyes dart eagerly between them. “So I’ll see you guys there?”

“We’ll be there.” Billy nods, followed by a scowl. “Those dumbasses better know how to make a fucking fire this time.”

*

Venice Beach at nightfall. Starry heavens above, orange flames coming off bonfire like liquid light. Waves of shiny blue-black lapping onto sand. A gathering around the fire. Metalheads, soon-to-be rockstars, models, druggies, groupies, even the odd skinhead, growing denser by the minute.

Patricia doesn’t know where she stands in the lot of them anymore. So deep into this scene yet somehow always an outsider. One foot in, one foot out. Not even constant interviews and being on Billy’s certified-cool arm can make that insecurity go away.

The main gathering is held in a big cabin nearby, bass pounding

towards the shore. Who the beachfront property belongs to is a mystery, but apparently it's bumping every weekend. She has a hollow feeling like they shouldn't go in there. That outside by stars and sea is best.

Billy puts some extra logs on weakening flames, adjusting the sloppy formation, muttering *braindead morons* under his breath. The fire rises high and strong. Smoke on the wind, getting into her clothes, her hair, her nostrils. She picks a spot on a log where the breeze doesn't send it directly in her face. Hugs her leather jacket closer, bare legs under her miniskirt catching a dusting of ash. Sips at light beer. Nursing it because going to work hungover is a bitch.

The dynamic between Billy and her is odd today. Last night was so tender, so romantic. Surreal. Brought out that vulnerable part of her that she'd rather keep safely tucked away. A sense of wary restraint now.

Too raw too soon. Mayhem turned them into sappy fools. Hearts poured out rash, consequence an afterthought. She's reeled it all back, offering that old icy detachment instead. He must sense the wall is up because the soft words and kisses haven't returned yet. Progressively distant all day. If she can play Ice Woman, he can meet her there just as aloof.

She never realized just how much she'd hate it.

Then to her delight, Dave takes out an acoustic guitar and starts to play. She admires agile fingers on the fretboard, some innate knowing in them that defies practice or effort. Gifted. Tones ringing so true she can almost taste them.

Billy sits down next to her and the comfort is instant. "Some kinda prodigy, right?"

"It's more obvious on an acoustic for some reason." Patricia wants to lean into him but hesitates.

"Wait'll you hear him sing."

As if on cue, Dave does just that. Belts out a heartbreaking rendition

of “California Dreamin” with a voice shockingly smooth and dark compared to his light spirit. Shows a complexity that startles.

“What the fuck.” Patricia marvels. “He’s *amazing* .” She wonders why he stays so quiet onstage.

“Dude’s a renaissance man. Midas touch no matter what he does.” A mix of admiration and insecurity in Billy’s voice. She didn’t expect the latter. “Lucky bastard.”

“You’ve got your own touch.” She finds herself comforting. Hates to hear him sulk when he’s bursting with talent too. “Thoroughly impressed me.”

“Thanks,” he nods. “Except I have to actually try. A lot.”

“You sparkle just as bright in the end.” That goes over well, flicker of a smile sent her way.

They watch in silence and despite the beautiful music, the peaceful stars, she gets antsy. Troubled by Billy not touching her, not teasing her, no moves made whatsoever. Cruel. Funny how absence creates such longing.

She places a hand on his thigh, curls fingers under his knee. Forging a path back to heat, fire. “Wanna know something weird?”

He glances down at her flirtatious hand. “Sure.”

“Mama Cass babysat me once.” She nods towards the Mama’s and The Papas tune emanating from Dave’s strings. “My mom knew her.”

“Are you serious?”

“She was a nice lady. Sang me to sleep. Had really comforting arms.”

“Not sure I believe you but cool story.” Billy disappoints her before he adds. “Got any more?” Curiosity in his fire-lit gaze.

“A few.” Patricia grins. Truth be told, she’s ripe with them. Buried in her bones like fat seedlings, waiting to unfurl. Waiting for the right ears. Lost on Derek, too self absorbed to be interested. On Amy too,

so easily disturbed. "I bet you've got some pretty crazy tales yourself. Some dangerous ones if that surfing story was any preview."

He must. Every inch of him screams wild nights and barely escaped injury.

"You don't know the half of it, baby." He wraps a warm arm around her and relief is so intoxicating, she has to hold back from mauling him right there.

She shifts closer. "You going to tell me your stories too?"

"All you gotta do is ask." Crystalline eyes scan her like the lick of a flame. "I'm an open book."

Open. She's not sure that's a good thing. Seems stupid, spilling your hopes, your dreams, your soul. Not everyone can be trusted with that. She learned the hard way.

The song ends on a note of sorrow. Taken to some tragic plain that sends a hush through the crowd.

"You fucking suck, man!" Some random metalhead bitches. Lie of the century. "Sick of this depressing shit. Play something good before I shoot myself."

"Like anyone would care if you did, asshole." Billy snaps across the fire.

Dave grins at the mean feedback. Tuning strings, unbothered. Natural confidence that can take a beating. "Nah, he's right. Here's something a bit lighter." He breaks out into some Hendrix jam that pleases everyone. Two lithe model-types get up to dance in the sand.

The night goes on. Closer and closer, sweeter and sweeter. Hands holding. Patricia leaning into Billy's shoulder, planting a few kisses on him. The beer she's had helps the process. So does the sea. So does the waning moon and Dave's enchanting melodies. Floating on starlight and fluffy clouds. Heaven.

It's only later, when Billy guides her into the dark, raving cabin that Patricia picks up a sinister energy. Arriving through the open

doorway as a fight over drug money gets broken up. The contrast makes her head spin. So packed with people, breathing is a struggle. Christmas lights illuminating empty beer cans and cigarette butts on every surface. Skid Row blasting from rattling speakers. She can hear the wet smack of fucking from the bathroom. The place screams cocaine, bleeds heroin.

They find a seat on some seedy armchair. No space so she sits on Billy's lap. He's into that, starts necking her, breath going heavy. Kisses deep, wet, dirty. A subtle grind under her ass. Urged on by the vice around them, the pulsing throb of metal. Leather on leather, filthy kiss for kiss. Patricia lets herself fall under his nasty-hot spell, diving into debauchery.

Billy grabs her hand, places it on the thick hard-on straining through his jeans. His obscenity makes her breath catch. "Wanna get outta here?"

She snatches fingers back, suddenly shy. "We've only been here for like an hour."

"We don't have to leave," he purrs, "Bedroom right around the corner. Locks too."

So he's used it before. "I'll pass."

"Bet you'll be begging me by the end of the night." Billy slides fingers up her inner thigh. Then glances at Dave who's motioning him over. "Be right back." He draws more sin from her lips before leaving.

Waiting for his return, she shoulders through the crowd to grab her second beer. Leans on the wall to take a sip, observing the drug-fuelled chaos. Skeptical. What should be old hat by now still alienates. That's when Cat's Eye's ever-inebriated lead singer, appears from the shadows. The most sober she's ever seen him. Making his way towards her through the wild crowd.

Nick rests against the wall beside her, too close for comfort. "Hey there."

Patricia glances over peroxide blonde and glassy green eyes that eat

her alive. Her muscles go tight with caution. "Hi."

"Don't think I've seen you around here before."

So he doesn't remember her walking in on him. Not surprising, considering how faded off smack he was. "Guess not."

"And what's a sweet thing like yourself doing here all alone?"

"I actually came here with Billy." She has to end this before it starts. "I fucked him last night so he brought me."

That should scare him away.

"Is that so?" Nick glances around the room, fake-confused. "Don't see him anywhere."

Great. He's one of those deliberately obtuse assholes. She hates those. "Literally right around the corner." She points a thumb behind her. "He just went to go talk to Dave."

"Sure he did," he says to her chest. "The name's Nick. What's yours, pretty girl?" Looks into her eyes and the words *fresh meat* reverberate in her head.

"Patricia." She backs up a step, takes a good look at him because there's something eerily familiar here. Handsome, blonde, light eyed. Like...Billy's lean-limbed brother. Thinner-lipped, vampire pale, hair more artificial, but the similarity is definitely there.

Except for one major difference. Billy's eyes have a piercing depth. Street smart intelligence that only comes from having to claw your way through dirt since birth. Takes one to know one. Nick has the flaccid gaze of someone spoiled rotten. Silver spoon shoved firmly in mouth. Gluttonous ego so rank it leaves a bitter taste on her tongue.

Derek and him should hang out.

"Patricia, Patricia," Nick tuts. "When are you gonna learn not to waste time with drummers? Especially *that* drummer. Don't you know he's no good?"

“Well, if this isn’t some Machiavellian shit.” Patricia folds her arms, has the strong instinct to turtle into herself. Duck and cover. “You’re really going to backstab your own bandmate to get in my pants, dude? Real classy.”

Nick doesn’t blink. “Just looking out for your precious heart, peaches,” He pushes towards her and she grimaces. “What are you, blonde number nineteen? Twenty? Gotta say you’re cuter than the last few, and that’s saying a lot. Smarter too. Usually Billy-boy likes em’ pretty and dumb before he throws them away.”

Patricia’s face hardens. “What the fuck are you trying to say to me?”

“He always did know how to pick em’.” Nick gives a dramatic sigh. Quite the actor. “A little tunnel-vision-y, but hey, when you’ve got a type, or let’s be real-a *fetish* - why not embrace it? Maybe it’s a narcissist thing. Some deep need to fuck himself.”

Despite her churning gut, that doesn’t entirely add up. “His last girlfriend was a brunette.” And so was Amy. Though, neither of those facts are exactly comforting.

“Rare anomaly, that tigress.” Nick muses. “Me myself, I’m more of a redhead guy. But for you? Well, for you, peaches, I’d go blonde for life.” He gives her a smarmy once-over. “Something tells me the curtains match the drapes. Tell me if I’m wrong.”

“You’ll never find out through me, creep.” Fingernails dig into her palms, seconds from slapping him. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go throw up.” She makes a move to leave.

“Are you a stripper by chance?” He blocks her off, “The last blonde was. Or was she a mud-wrestler? I forget. Now *she* was skilled. Loved to share her tricks backstage.” Mean eyes glint so there’s no missing the double entendre. “You got some special tricks to share, peaches? Looks like you know a lot.”

She’s about to shove past him, gasps instead as forceful arms wrap around her waist from behind. Pulled hard into a fiercely possessive hold. Sends electric heat through her, competing with the knots in her stomach.

“Nick, *amigo* .” Billy’s low rasp cuts to marrow. Makes her wince because it’s full of malice. “Where’s Tanya?”

Nick shoots a harsh grin back. Unfazed. “Couldn’t make it. Modelling gig in the morning.”

“Right.” Billy nips at her neck and she shivers. Point made clear. Has a vibe that he would fuck her here against the wall right now to cement that point. “You should call her. Remind her how much of a one-woman man you are.”

“Oh, but I was just chatting with the lovely Patricia here. Boy, does she look *familiar* .” Nick gives her a wink like they’re both in on some hilarious inside joke. “Why does it feel like I’ve seen her before?”

“She’s been backstage more than once. If you weren’t holed up in the bathroom the entire fucking time you might have remembered. Or remembered one of the million times I told you about her featuring us in Live Wire.”

Nick chokes at that last sentence. “ *You’re* the chick that writes Live Wire?”

“Yeah.” She’s sweating. Trapped between two golden predators circling each other.

“No fucking way. Wow, didn’t think you’d be so...” Nick glances behind her to smirk. Must have caught Billy’s glare. “Anyways, I thought you’d be uglier. Always pictured some homely dyke. You don’t seem the type.”

“Of course not,” she snaps. “God forbid I ever do anything but strip and mud-wrestle.”

He ignores that. “Wish you interviewed me too. Would have been a better cover for sure, you know, being the lead singer and all.” Mocking green eyes flash at Billy, tinged with jealousy. “No offense, man.”

“Billy said you hate being interviewed.”

“Not by you. I’d let you interview me over and over.” Nick gives her

a look designed to make her swoon. All she feels is muscle tighten around her and shock at just how much he doesn't give a shit.

"Hey, Nick," Billy's squeezing so hard she can barely breathe. "Fuck off and go say hi to Dave for me. He's been itchin' to have a little chat with you. Something about you owing him a couple grand? Real icebreaker."

Nick's mouth parts for a moment of speechlessness. Nerve clearly struck. "Yeah, whatever." He walks away in an embarrassed huff. "*Dick.*"

Billy's hold loosens. Patricia breathes out slowly, tense all over. Fingers turn her chin to give her another thorough kiss from behind. When he pulls back, she's dizzy. And so very distraught.

"So are you gonna piss on me next?" She wonders if he was this territorial with the others. No touching his objects.

Billy's thumb smooths over her bottom lip. "Right, because you'd rather I just ignored you and didn't give a fuck about him being a complete asshat."

Point taken. "Alright, you win."

"I know." He murmurs into her ear, makes her tingle. Right back to where they left off. "Gets you hot, doesn't it? Knowing you're all mine."

More hot than she'd like after just discovering she's blonde slut of the month.

The party gets more topsy-turvy. A couple of girls strip down to birthday suits in the living room, snort cocaine off each other's boob jobs. Tongue each other to the cheer of a wasted crowd. Patricia scoffs at the increasing degeneracy, now in the foulest mood. Doesn't anybody here work tomorrow?

"So much for chill." Patricia morbidly chugs back water. Wants to ward off fuzziness encroaching after a couple drinks.

"This is pretty tame." Billy cracks open his one beer of the night,

watching the show with a detachment that only comes from being numbed by exposure.

“That’s because you freaks are all sick bastards.” Her tone bites like teeth. Gone all chilly again. “Determined to make Caligula look like a fucking saint.”

“Oh come on, you’ve hung out with every band on The Strip. I’m sure you’ve seen shit way worse than this.”

True. “Never enjoyed this part. Happen to very judge-y about it.”

“You’re in the wrong line of work then, baby.” Billy takes a swig of beer. “Try hanging out with some folk singers.”

Patricia remembers the folk hippies that surrounded her childhood. Everyone slept with each other like it was going out of style. Half of them died from alcoholism or overdose. “Believe me, they’re no better.”

*

“So, what’s happening tonight?” Billy asks as they make their way through sand to his car. Escaped from the party’s growing insanity. Who knows what unholiness is escalating there now. “Wanna sleep over again? I can drop you off at work in the morning.”

“No, it’s okay.” She’ll keep her distance until she knows what the fuck is going on. There’s not enough clear thinking when she’s with him. Distracted by masculine beauty and lust. Searing emotion that scares her to death.

“You really wanna sleep in a place full of paint fumes? Can’t be healthy to breathe that in.”

“I’ll keep the windows open.”

“Still feelin’ sketchy, are we?”

“I’m not feeling anything. I just want to go home.” Lies. She feels too much. A molotov cocktail of confusion. Wants desperately to ask about the carousel of disposable blonde bimbos. Resists because she’s

terrified it's true.

"So I can't get you to stay another night, but...you wanna go out again next weekend? Specifically, do you wanna come to our next show? We're playing the Whiskey. It's sort of a big fuckin' deal."

The Whiskey A-Go-Go. The dark, dingy club on Sunset Boulevard. Debauchery to the nines. Full of rock and roll history. Memories of sixties indulgence she's never experienced but told so clearly by Ma, it's like she was there for the ride. Probably wasn't right that she told her little kid every lewd detail, but Ma always had a knack for being twisted.

For some reason she wants to jump in the fire again. Unwise.

"I don't see why I can't swing by." Keep it light. Keep it breezy. Don't attach. Maybe the problem is with the attaching.

Billy's molten smile makes her heart burst. "Cool."

He drives her home. She tries to ignore how much she *does* want to spend the night again despite Nick's dirt. Wants to keep talking and cuddling and fucking because she's helplessly weak-kneed now. Wants to cling all night because she's so damn scared of sleeping alone.

She won't let him know that.

"You bolt that door, alright?" Billy glances warily at her as she takes her seatbelt off. "And if anything happens, call me. Anything."

"I'll be fine." She reaches for the handle. Cool and composed as a glacier. Ready to leave without another word or embrace. Frozen stone between them.

"Hey, c'mere." Billy gently grabs her arm. Leans into her and hovers inches from her lips. Makes her wait for his mouth, teases before he finally blesses. She surrenders to more passion, fallen for his persuasion. "You like this with every guy?"

"Like what?" She whispers in-between kisses.

His voice drops to rasping velvet at her ear. “Like if you let go with me for one second you’re gonna break.”

She wrenches back at that blade of a comment.

“I saw this part of you last night, a little glimpse today. This...soft-hearted girl. Open. Let me in. Held me like she gave a fuck.” Billy’s stare lingers, touches her inside and out. “I’d like to see her again sometime.”

She can’t believe his nerve. Selfish. Pushy. Like she didn’t just get her heart and home destroyed, didn’t just get put through hell. Still so fragile. Throw in Nick’s very possible gossip, and she’d be insane to be wide open now.

“See you next weekend, Billy. Be grateful I’m giving you that.”

Patricia vacates the Camaro, disoriented. In her building without a backwards glance. Trudges up the stairs to her freshly-painted apartment and bolts the door shut. Looks out her window to find his car gone. Hates herself for wishing he was still here, already missing his warmth. The feeling of safety.

Salt pours over the threshold. Locks get checked twice before she burrows into her new mattress, restlessly stirring, Auntie Doris’s black tourmaline cradled against her chest. Hopes sleep takes her to painless nothing.

Except, sleep is impossible.

He was right about the paint fumes.

Notes for the Chapter:

Nick providing the negging. Thanks Nick.

Thanks for your kudos/comments.They make my day! 💕

11. dreaming of you

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys. Man, this was a very difficult chapter to write, definitely the hardest one so far. Must have rewritten it five times. A lot of emotional nuances to hit and I'm still not sure I nailed it. But...I'm tired of staring at the words so. Here ya go!

Trigger warnings: blood, knives, kinky sex (not related to the former lol), and A LOT of dialogue.

Hope you enjoy :)

The first day back at work is rough. She's so behind. Paper piling around her ears in perilous towers, threatening to collapse. Apparently nobody covered for her. Just kept stacking on her desk like dutiful little minions. Thanks, Janice. Like she hadn't covered for *her* when she got sick for two whole weeks.

Worse yet is when her boss corners her. That perverse smile twisting his greasy face. "Sweet Patricia. How was your vacation? You had fun I hope?"

"Yes, sir." Fingers pause over her keyboard. "A real gay ol' time." Tight smile. Sardonic eyes. She just can't help it.

"Lovely." Clearly he only asked so he could segway to his main inquiry. "I have a little question for you."

Questions are never good. Not with that tone.

"Yes?" She picks up her big blue mug to sip.

"You haven't happened to notice disappearing supplies around here have you?"

Patricia almost spews a mouthful of coffee. "Disappearing supplies?"

"Yes, we appear to have a thief in our midsts. Paper is missing. Ink.

Glue. It's just...gone."

Shit . She's a complete fucking idiot. Shouldn't have made double the copies of Live Wire these past few months without replacing the stock. Of course they'd notice. Overconfidence from so many months of smooth sailing made her careless. High demand making her churn out copies without a second thought.

"I'm sorry, sir. I have no idea. This is the first I've heard of it."

"Okay, dear, just thought I'd ask as you're so diligent with keeping on top of things." Beady eyes peer down her blouse. "Anyways, let me know if you hear or see of anything. That's money slipping right through our fingers and I won't stand for it." His face colors to blistering red. Demonic wrath held back by skin. "They *will* pay."

She gulps. "Of course, sir. I'll let you know if anything comes up."

He's back to usual form in a blink. Lewd, sick Pan in a suit. Hooves no doubt hidden under tweed slacks. "That's my girl. My darling prized worker." A sweaty ham fist reaches out to lightly cuff her chin. She's tempted to rip it right off his wrist before he slithers to go harass another caged bird a few cubicles away.

Patricia goes frantic inside. Wonders how she's going to get away with this now. Small batches just won't do anymore. Yet if she continues with the obviously large ones, she's going to get caught. Inevitable.

This is going to be difficult.

*

Patricia soaks in the bathtub after a few more stressful workdays. Night peeking through her window, fragrant vanilla candles surrounding her. Bubbles popping.

The light in the dark feels empty. The scents don't soothe. Knots and tight muscles won't relax no matter the water temperature or bathsalt. Rock-weight in her flesh. A constant quick pulse, locked in, waiting to explode. Any second. Any moment anything could happen. The tables ever-turning.

She broods about her burgeoning little empire now on the rocks. Live Wire might be coming to an end. She was warned and for some reason didn't see the inevitable, didn't prepare. Yet, it somehow seems the least of her problems.

Auntie Doris's tarot cards flash in her mind. A red heart impaled. A collapsed body stabbed through. A flaming tower, people dropping to their deaths out the windows. Terror, pain, shock. Then lovers entwined. Cups overflowing. Peace and love.

Who can you trust with convoluted shit like that? Who's the trustworthy one? Who's the one getting stabbed in the back? Who's falling out the tower?

Falling, a good word for her life now. For tricks and schemes. For her own successes. For a certain blonde drummer that won't leave her mind, no matter the potential disaster. Craving him. Missing him. Wishing he'd call despite knowing she made the worst impression last weekend. Hot and biting cold.

Something shifted between them since getting picked up in the desert, despite her paranoia. No use lying to herself about it. He burrowed deeper under her skin. Etched his name there. Made her long for more. Now she's a mess. A suspicious, pining mess. Teetering. Hungry.

Guilty.

Patricia gets out the tub, towelled up and glistening. Makes her way to the living room. Stands in front of the phone and stares, dripping to carpet. Fingers hover inches above the plastic for a moment before she pulls away. Backs up slowly. Turns to her room. Gets in her negligee and climbs into bed.

She'll sleep on it.

*

She wakes up to the sound of rattling. Cold sweat on her skin.

That's all she hears. The death rattle. Deafening. Clanking like bones.

"Let me in....let me in....let me in.." A hissing mantra tunnels through her skull. Sharp whispers like burning acid. Hot venom. "Let me innnn, Patricia." Mocking snake-tongue.

Fear slices down spine and belly. She jerks upright. Limbs move jagged-stiff of their own accord, kicking blankets off in a spastic fit. A flailing puppet. An invisible master shaking strings.

Feet slap to hardwood. Hands stretch out like the undead. Legs tug forward. Sucked out her bedroom, around the corner to the front entrance, the whispering steady and cruel in her ears. The doorknob shaking, vibrating.

"...let me in....let me in...let me in...."

The knob turns slowly. Clicks. Then slams open. Searing white light blinds before it reveals.

Handsome. Frozen. Pale. Eyes a colorless, milky white.

Derek. A perfect dark entity. Floating towards her with palms open. A soundless scream rips dry from her throat.

She's flattened on the living room carpet in a second. Back rug-burned. Pressed down by that same mysterious force as Derek drops to his knees. Crawls like a spider on top of her. Blue-veined ghost skin shining. He rips open her white negligee. Hands everywhere icy-hot. Laughing hysterically in her ear. "Thought you could run?"

Screams muffle to nothing. Tears flow silent down her face, trickle down her throat. She uses all her strength to move her hand. Fingers pitifully weak. Moving molasses-slow at her side. They finally find a sharp steel dagger. Nicking her fingers bloody before she wraps her palm around the handle. The dagger stabs forward.

"Let me in, Trish." The blade gets stopped. Blue eyes meet hers.

Derek is Billy now. Golden-sheened. Gilded bronze between her open thighs. He slowly twists the knife towards her. Holds it against her heart. She pushes at his chest but he's a brick wall.

The knife crumbles to rose petals that sink through skin. His warm palm

presses flat against her chest. Calloused fingers trailing upwards to tuck hair behind her ear. Lips descending for a soft kiss.

Then the room disappears. The ceiling now black sky, pricked with twinkling, shooting stars. Sound of pounding waves. She lies in wet sand, alone. The dark sea sweeping, frothing around her ankles. Warm as bathwater.

"Billy?" She sits upright to scan the shoreline. Empty and endless. "Billy..."

He's gone. Left her safe at shore. She watches waves lap over toes, mesmerized. Lonely in her wet silk.

She glances sideways. Derek lies naked, sprawled at her hip, sloe-eyed and pathetic now. Soaked to bone. Pallid driftwood.

He coughs up seawater, hacks til there's nothing left. "Looks more shallow before you dive in."

"I should have warned you about the deep end." She touches chilled flesh, wants to embrace but can't. "I knew and watched you drown." She peeks down at his quivering stomach where the dagger embeds to the hilt now. Blood dripping thick to sand. "Did I...?"

"Sunk it in all by myself, Pat." He gives her a hollow smile, crimson-glossed. Stares at the pooling mess, fingers dipping to come back red. "Going to need another hit. Can't feel a damn thing."

Patricia wakes up crying. Throat and cheeks damp. Hand grasping desperately for the lamp at her bedside table, all the while fearing that light will reveal Derek lying bloody on the floor. As a phantom hovering.

It was all too real. Every sight, touch, sound in technicolor clarity. Or Stygian darkness, drawing her down the gory river of terror.

She gets out of bed cautiously. Scanning the room for ghosts and ghouls. Tiptoes through her apartment like every corner holds wraiths that will pull her back to the shadowland. For all she knows, this could still be the dream. The floor could open up to Hell and suck her in.

A glass of ice-cold water from the fridge wakes her up. She stares at the living room phone as she gulps it back. Proceeds to pad over and stand in front of it. Analyzes it's every mark and edge for minutes, heart pounding because she's about to do something risky.

If anything happens...anything.

Time to test that theory. Patricia picks up the phone and dials. It rings two, three, four times. Too long for her anxious state of mind, about to hang up and chide herself.

Then he answers.

"Hello?" A deep grumble on the other end, heavy with sleep.

"Billy? It's uh-Patricia. Hi." Every word comes out woodenly awkward.

"Hey." His voice shifts to something serious. "You alright?"

"Uh-" The intensity of how unnecessary this is hits her. "Technically, yes. But also...no."

"What happened?"

She runs fingers through her hair. They get tangled in knots and she yanks through. "This seems stupid now that I'm about to say it out loud, but um... I had a nightmare."

There's a loaded pause. "Must have been pretty fuckin' bad."

Not the most pleasant tone. She roused the grumpy bear.

"You played a big part in it." She winces at how that sounds. "I mean-"

Billy breaks into an irritated chuckle. " I was the fucking nightmare? That's nice. Thanks for calling."

"No, that came out wrong." She backtracks. "You helped me."

Another pause. "Did I save you from the monster?"

“Yeah.” Derek’s glassy-white eyes flash before her. “In a way.”

“I like that better.”

“Yes.” More awkwardness tumbles. She’s pacing. A short line where the coffee table once lay intact. Cord dragging. “Billy, I know I was... sort of harsh last weekend. I get if you’re mad at me.”

He takes a breath like she definitely had hit a nerve. “Not mad. More like...baffled.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Though the fact you called at all kinda shocks me. Or you even agreeing to go out with me again. Why bother? Do you even like me?”

Regret makes a lump rise in her throat. “I like you, Billy. I really, really do-”

“Like, don’t torture yourself to make me feel better-”

“No, it’s not like that.” Every word strains. “I’m just...going through a shitty time right now. I’m acting super weird. I don’t want to, it just keeps happening. Bad things keep happening to me. People keep telling me things that scare me...”

“I mean, I get it. All that shit back to back? Super fucked up. Kills me that you had to go through it.” He pauses. “I’m just sick of playing freeze tag with you, Trish. Fuckin’ hate that game. Never did get the rules.”

“I never wanted to play it. I didn’t mean for things to go that way. I’m sorry.”

A silent moment before his voice lightens. “Alright. Cool.” Shrugged off just like that. Almost touching how easy he lets go. “Apology accepted.”

“Good. That’s...good.” She decides right then to spill about Nick’s gossip, her fears. Give the reason for Sunday night’s sudden cold front. “Billy, at the bonfire, someone told me about-”

“Do you need me right now?” he blurts over her.

She sits down on the couch, fingers wrapping around the phone cord.
“Need you how?”

“Do you want me to come over?”

The offer hangs in the air like an effervescent star, makes her buzz head to toe. “You’d really do that?”

He goes all coy and husky. “Maybe I had a nightmare too.”

“Did you actually?”

“Oh yeah. A real bad one. Clowns and....Bon Jovi.” There’s no doubt he’s grinning sharp. “Jon Bon Jovi in a clown suit tried to fuck me.”

“You so did not dream that.” A small laugh escapes. “You don’t have to.”

Shuffling, a lighter clanking before an exhale. “I kinda really do though. Need someone to hold me, sing me lullabies, promise me that Bon Jovi isn’t real. Just a very, very bad dream.”

“It’s one in the morning.” She imagines the glowing cherry of his cigarette. Imagines golden honey skin under sheets, naked, seductive. Imagines him imagining her, just as lush. “On a Wednesday. We both work.”

“So? Not like that stopped you from calling.”

She pretends to think about it, already anticipating. Gives an exaggerated sigh. “I suppose I could serenade you.”

“Great, looking forward to you tucking me in.” He’s all warm murmurs now. Her skin prickles with goosebumps. “Hey, what were you going to say earlier about the bonfire? Cut you off, sorry.”

“Oh, that.” She doesn’t want to share or receive truth anymore. Just needs him in her bed as soon as possible. Kissing it better. “Nothing important.”

Fuck it. Life is painful enough as it is. She'll take the damn comfort.

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"Thanks for coming." Patricia lets Billy into her apartment, floral bathrobe wrapped around her. He drops his backpack on the kitchen table, gives her that half-lidded gaze.

"Like I said, if you need me, call me." He leans against the counter. "So wanna tell me more about this nightmare you had?"

Derek's blood in the sand. Hard to stop thinking about the blood. "I'd rather not." She makes her way towards her bedroom, where lamplight shines a dusky ambient glow.

He follows a step behind her. "Are you sure?"

"Completely."

"Want me to check for monsters?"

She gives a wry smile over her shoulder. "Already checked. Coast is clear."

He draws near to her. Electric current between them as they approach her bed. "Want me to cuddle you, tell you monsters aren't real?"

"The fear went away after you picked up, honestly." She turns to him, waiting to get pounced on. Overwhelmed with desire at the thought.

"So sleep it is." Billy doesn't touch her. Slinks off his leather jacket, exposes a tight red shirt that flatters and beckons. Comes off too fast to appreciate. Jeans next. Soon nonchalant in his nakedness, taking her breath away even after seeing his bare muscle multiple times. He gets under her sheets, stretches with a hearty groan. Living out the visual she had of him during their call.

She stands at the foot of the bed. Drops her robe. Reveals translucent silk, moon-pale.

“Well, those sure are fancy pj’s.” White teeth press to his lower lip before he smirks. “You didn’t change into that before I got here, did you?”

“No,” Her knee comes onto the bed. “I just like feeling pretty.” She crawls towards him.

“You really need lingerie for that?” Burning eyes caress. “Not that I’m complaining.”

Patricia tucks in under the covers next to him and he’s still playing the coquette. She didn’t anticipate that, fully expecting to be mauled on sight. Can feel his bodyheat with a foot between them, obviously turned on.

She glides fingers up his strong thigh. “You can cuddle me.”

“Sure.” He slings a casual arm around her. Just lays there all serene. Annoyingly still even as he tents her sheets.

Patricia can’t take it anymore. She rolls to climb on top of him. Straddles his waist, palms pressing into the hard planes of his chest. “I want you.”

He gives her a toying look. “And here I was all gung-ho with the self-restraint.” Warm hands slide up beneath her negligee, curve over her bare hips.

She leans down for a kiss, writhing slowly against where he’s rock-hard. Wet panties between them. “Thought you wanted to fuck with all that “tuck me into bed” talk.”

“I was fully prepared for chaste handholding. But uh-” A hand slides between her legs, dips under fabric to feel her need, “seems like you’re rarin’ to go. Shocking.”

Patricia goes breathy at teasing fingers. “Guess you bring out my slutty side.”

“I tend to have that effect on people.” He skims up her waist to cup a full breast, tone gone raspy. Eyes hooded. “You gonna ride me, princess?” He jerks the fabric down so she spills out her nightwear,

ready to bounce.

“Maybe.” She pushes panties aside, runs her slick folds up and down the flat of his cock. “Or maybe I’ll just rub on you for a few seconds and call it a night.”

Billy pulls her head down for a dominating kiss, leaves her breathless. “Go right ahead.” He licks his fingers to play with her nipple.

She pulls her underwear off. Lines herself up and sinks down with a moan. Takes a moment to absorb the impact, filled to the hilt. “Fuck.” She starts a rough rhythm right away. Slamming into him how she wanted to deep down at the party. Violent, squeezing tight. Watches his eyes roll back into his skull.

“Jesus, baby.” Palms slap to her hips, bring her to a sudden stop. “You tryin’ to make me come in twenty seconds?”

“Sorry,” She moves slower, a sensual grind. “Got a lot of pent up aggression right now.”

“God, your tits look amazing. Fucking hell.” He gropes soft flesh. Glances up at her hungry gaze. “Your eyes too, the way you look at me. Siren.”

She naturally clenches around him at that, fingers descending to rub her clit. “I might come in twenty seconds too.”

“Uh. No you won’t.” He grabs her hand, then the other. Pins them at her side. “You come when I say you can come.” He ruts up into her, setting the pace to pounding.

She groans at raw sensation. “Why do you get to go fast? Unfair.”

“Life isn’t fair, sweetheart.” He yanks her down into a vice grip, her breasts crushed against his chest. Kisses her something fierce as he fucks hard. “Thought everyone knew that.”

She gets rolled to her back, pinned under him. His hips go languid now, angling against her clit.

The pressure sends her soaring. "Gonna come."

"Nope." He strokes in deep. Pulls out all the way and she whines. Pushes back in again and keeps still inside her. "Not yet."

"*Billy*," she hisses, writhes, trying to get him to move.

He doesn't budge an inch. "*Relax*, baby. You'll get there." A dirty smile. "If you're a good girl."

"Ugh-I'm...why..." She twines fingers into his hair, yanks at the roots to punish. "Are you gonna fuck with me or fuck me?"

Billy's eyes flare searing hot at her aggression. He gives her savage thrusts in response, skin slapping, eliciting shrill gasps. "Looks like someone was raised in a barn. Do I really need to walk you through this?" He pulls out once more, leaves her squirming and frustrated as he taunts sweetly in her ear. "Patience is a virtue. Good things come to those who wait. Basic shit, honey."

She's achingly empty, sick with lust. "Please...you're torturing me..."

"Haven't you ever edged before?" He buries his face in her neck to lick, bite. Tip of him teasing her opening.

"No," she moans. "What the hell is that?"

He rubs the head of his cock against her clit. "This."

Patricia sighs with pleasure. "I'm dying...Billy..."

Billy pushes into her again, real slow, stoking another whine. "All worth it for the big finish, baby. Trust me."

He keeps at his game. Driving her to the near-peak multiple times. Stopping before she can fly off the edge. Shifting positions. Going down on her to suck and lap. No release. Heaven and hell.

When she's head down, ass up, he finally fucks her to completion. Headboard slamming, leaving dents in new paint. Her ass pink from spanking. Thick fingers stroking between her legs as he pummels.

Then she's exploding. Detonating. Earth crumbling. Fast and impossibly hard. Grateful her face is buried in her pillow to absorb her vulgar release. That he's there to hold her shuddering limbs as she collapses. His own climax following just as intense.

Afterwards they lay there in a stupor. When she closes her eyes she sees golden light. That empty needy feeling gone now, left only with sated muscle and melted bone. She listens to the streetnoise of Hollywood. To the steady heartbeat in the chest under her ear. Can't tell where flesh ends and soul begins.

"You're scarily good at that," she says after a stretch of sweet nothing.

"I try," He tucks hair behind her ear. Kisses her with butterfly delicacy, now so soft with her. Stirs up memories of her last dream. "Kinda helps we fit together perfectly."

"I like how you take care of me after."

"You mean, how I don't leave?"

"Not just that...it's like...you enjoy it. Being here with me."

"I do." He cups the back of her head. Tastes her slow. "Could spend a whole month just lying here with you."

Sparks and glitter at that idea. "Shame about work."

"Fuck work. I wanna be your slave. Feed you grapes. Fan you with giant palm leaves. That kinda shit."

She giggles at the lavish image. "Yeah right, you'd want it the other way around."

"True," he grins. "You'll have to call me King Billy. Bow down on all fours. Polish my crown daily, lots of spit."

"In your dreams." She doesn't admit the fantasy turns her on. "And obviously I'd be Queen. You'll have to wash my feet. Anoint them with scented oils." She points her toes in the air.

"I'm...very into that." He stares at plum-painted nails glittering. "Queen Trish it is."

They linger for a pleasant beat. Patricia decides now is the time for the looming question. Though the words sound sudden when they bolt from her mouth. An interrogation with a blinding light. "Do you have any fetishes? Sexual obsessions? Kinks? Anything I should be aware of?"

Like pretty blonde playthings for instance.

"Uhhh," He looks at her curiously, "shouldn't you have asked me that before we...?"

"Probably. But do you?"

Billy gives a dismissive shrug. "A lot of things turn me on but obsessions? Not much beyond the basic tits and ass." He nudges her. "Why? Do you got any you'd like to share with the class?"

She can barely hide her relief, knots dissolving. "No, just wondering if you were a freak."

Billy laughs. "Oh, I can get freaky. As freaky as you want me to be."

She pretty much got that the instant she met him. "Good to know."

They float in silence again. Lips brush against her temple. A perfect moment before he breaks it. "Promise me something, Trish."

"What?"

"That you won't change tomorrow."

There's an edge in his voice that fills her with nervous strain, mood shifting fast. "What do you mean?"

"You're so *you* right now. But maybe that'll disappear in the morning. Then I'll be back to feeling like an asshole again."

So she's not entirely forgiven, forgotten. "Oh."

"I'm just afraid you're gonna be a different person when I wake up."

Her stomach turns. "I'm afraid you're going to be a different person when I wake up too."

Billy goes quiet. He gets it now. "Trish. I'm never gonna do what he did. You know that, right?"

"See, that would be comforting if he didn't tell me the exact same thing." The words come up like bile.

"There was someone before this guy too?"

"A few, yeah. Derek promised he was going to be different. Put so much faith in him. Turns out he was the worst of them all by a landslide."

He holds her closer. "I'm not gonna hurt you. I know you don't believe me yet. But I mean it."

"Billy." She cups his face for emphasis. "We usually never *mean* to hurt people, but we do. That's inevitable. Collateral for starting these things. Someone always gets hurt, eventually."

She can almost see his heart deflate like a balloon. "Well...I never would intentionally."

"I know," she croaks. "It's the unintentional part that's fucking with my head."

"I can a hundred percent guarantee that I'd never hurt you anywhere near as bad as that asshole did. Whatever we have is gonna far outweigh the inevitable hurt, if we give it a damn chance. I promise."

She just doesn't know if she can handle another *drop* of hurt.

"Let's...go day by day." A heavy-hearted murmur. "I'm fucked up right now, Billy. I'm really, really fucked up. Feels like I'm drowning."

"Okay." He smooths a strand of hair from her forehead. "Just. Don't freeze me out, alright? Fuckin' kills me."

She didn't see that admission coming. "I don't mean to. But, sometimes it's like you forget we don't know each other. Haven't even had one steady week together yet. I don't trust *anyone* that fast. Don't push so hard. Give me some time."

"Look, I know I can be intense. It just feels like I've known you longer. Way longer. When things are clicking, we flow so damn smooth. More than any chick I've ever been with."

"I get that feeling..."

"I'm not usually *this* crazy though, you know? Never been this crazy for anyone."

She goes scarlet in the half-light. "Really?"

"Yeah, I dunno...the way you move, talk, look. Everything. Burns me up. It's like..." He searches for words. "I wanted someone like you so bad but I thought you were just a dream. But you're real, Trish. You're so fuckin' real."

She can't speak for a moment. Breath halted by romantic fantasy before pessimism sets in. "Billy, you can't know if I'm real yet. It's way too soon. I could still be a dream. For all you know I might be a nightmare."

"Well, aren't you just a ray of sunshine." Billy scoffs. "Glass half full kinda gal."

"I'm being realistic. You don't *know* me, Billy. Get to know me, then decide whether I'm real or not."

"Oh, I want to. Believe me. But the process keeps getting impeded, doesn't it?"

She looks into his eyes, asks carefully. "What's the longest you've been with someone?"

Billy pauses. "Six months. You?"

"A year."

“With him?”

“Yes.”

He takes that in for a beat. “He must have really done a one-eighty on you. Can’t see a girl like you taking that shit lying down for long.”

“We were in love at first. Well, at least I was.” Patricia watches Billy’s expression turn grim. “And obviously that went sideways.” She shifts the spotlight. “I guess we’re both kind of inexperienced with the relationship thing.”

“I’ve had more than enough chances. Just never met anyone I really- this feels different.”

Patricia feels her boundaries relaxing, laced with panic. “Maybe...try not to push me, go slow and we’ll see how it goes. Let’s take it easy.”

“I mean, I can try, but I’m always gonna be me. Kind of naturally hot-blooded. It’s not gonna go away just like that.”

“Well, I’m naturally cagey. But...I can try too.” She takes a long breath. “I want to try.”

Billy goes bright at her yielding. “I’d like that.” All gentle touches. “Trying is a start.” He squeezes her into his chest with a smile like it’s all so easy. Piece of cake from here on out.

Despite her surrender, she’s still tense. Torn between two worlds. One of tenderness, fields of roses, magnolia-laden hope. The other, bloody hearts and gushing red wounds, where the other shoe always drops.

Who knows which world will win out.

*

That sun-lit morning, she sits in Billy’s Camaro, sore and pleasantly exhausted on the drive to her work. Keeps peeking at him to stare, still high from last night. Still terrified.

Billy pops a cigarette in his mouth. Burns it to smoulder, squinting as he reaches for aviators on the dashboard. “So, about the show this

weekend. You know it's going to be pretty wild, right?"

"Yeah, it's The Whiskey. Par for the course."

Reflecting sunglasses slip on, mirror her tired face back to her. "But, I mean, are you ready? Seemed like you were super on edge about those chicks at the house party."

"I've been there before," she replies. A hint of irritation at his concern. Like not being enthusiastic about orgiastic insanity is a sign of her being delicate. "And I wasn't squeamish, just annoyed."

"So you know it's gonna be way worse then. Especially with the bands playing that night. Gonna make those girls look like they were playing footsies. Just warning you."

Patricia gives an amused smile at him trying to ease her before the mayhem starts. "I'm prepared, don't worry. I mean, my mom used to be a regular there back in the day. Was raised hearing about the lifestyle." She's still painting broad brushstrokes. Not ready to let him know *just* how much she's seen and heard as a kid.

"Huh. Your mom seems cool as fuck."

"She is." Patricia admits, glancing at tall palm trees whipping past. "She's also the worst person I've ever met." The last line comes out easy.

Billy takes a pensive drag. "I kinda get that feeling."

"You do?"

He nods. "My mom was similar, sounds like. Wild child. Free spirit. But fickle. Selfish. Would rather run than tough shit out." His next pull of smoke seems too long. White haze billowing around them. "What about your dad?"

She hesitates a moment. "Never met him. One night stand."

"I see." No judgement in the remark.

"Yeah, some Colombian flamenco guitarist apparently."

Billy stops at a red light. "You're latina?" He scans over blonde hair and blue eyes. "Think your Mom's genes won out."

"For all I know, she could be dead wrong. Not like she was keeping track. Lied a lot too."

He peers closer. "I kinda see it, actually. Might explain those beautiful, full lips." He meets her mouth for a kiss.

She blooms hot pink at the flattery, though she knows that feature isn't exclusive to one ethnicity. "Thanks."

"And your ass."

Patricia smacks his shoulder with a grin. "What about your dad?"

Billy's expression goes bleak. A sullen look towards the light flashing green. "Thank the universe everyday that I'm not under his roof anymore."

She won't push it further. "Well, I think I get why we're friends now."

He shakes his head at that. "We're not friends, Trish. We're lovers. The fated kind. Know it down to my bones and then some."

Patricia goes very still.

"You are one smooth dude, Billy." She pretends fireworks aren't bursting inside. "A bit over the top, but very smooth."

"It's a gift." He cocks his chin towards the window. "This the place?" They're approaching her work now. Ugly, grey, towering. Dread emanating from dull cement.

"Yup." Her shoulders sink. Gut doing backflips and not the happy kind. Ready to get caught and fired.

"Looks depressing as fuck." He pulls over against the curb.

"Oh, it's much worse than that."

"Hope the time passes quickly." He takes aviators off to reveal pretty

lashes, leans towards her. "So I'll pick you up at nine on Saturday? We play at eleven."

"Alright. See you then." She pecks him goodbye but he won't let her go without some tongue, without leaving her sparkling and fizzy. She climbs out the car, dreamy-eyed, excited for more.

"Hey, Trish?"


"Yeah?" She bends to meet his gaze.

"Thanks for trying."

She gives him the softest smile before shutting the Camaro door. Floating high. A secret joy growing, keeping her toasty-warm inside. Prays she can maintain this magic all day.

Any setback would be a breeze if she could just keep this feeling alive.

Notes for the Chapter:

Would love to chat with you about this one. Feel free to comment below or on my tumblr. 

12. the jungle

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey y'all! This one is gonna be the most "historically accurate" chapter so far as it includes The Whiskey A-Go-Go which is a real place and includes brief mentions of a certain band that was a super frequent player on The Sunset Strip at the time. So far I've mostly put in fake bands and fake clubs heavily inspired by the 80s L.A metal scene but thought I'd bring in more real life examples this time because I wanted to show just how truly excessive it got back then.

I took liberties with the layout of the venue but I'd say that nothing in this chapter is exaggerated and the scene definitely was this over-the-top without a doubt.

So...enjoy! :)

The Whiskey A-Go-Go sparkles luminous as the rising stars inside it tonight. Shooting fast and bright. A full set-list of bands soon to become household names. To Patricia, it seems like Cat's Eye has definitely crossed the margin into L.A celebrity. Record execs in the crowd, no doubt ready to sign them on a moment's notice. She's actually surprised it hasn't happened already.

"I'm so excited for you guys!" Patricia stands outside Dave's big van with Billy at her side, watching them unload amps and equipment in the alley behind the venue. "This night is so important. Do you realize what this means?"

"I know. You've said it about a hundred times, Trish. Kinda psyching me out." Billy smooths a hand down her hair, kisses her scalp.

Dave's head emerges from the van's backdoors to catch the smooch. "Oh, you two....breaking my heart over here. And my *back* ." He gestures inside. "Mind giving a hand, guys? "

“Sorry, bud.” Billy leans in to pick up an amp. “Have you seen Rosco?” He glances at Patricia. “We’ve got a missing bass player on our hands.”

“Why have I never met him yet?” Patricia reaches over to help Billy. He shrugs her away, gives her his drumsticks to hold. “He’s so great onstage and then he’s never there after.”

“It’s because he plays for three other bands. By the time our set is done, he’s down the street playing for the next gig.” He smirks at Dave. “Think he’s two-timing? He was bound to abandon us eventually.”

“I’m right here, ya fuckin’ asswipes.” Rosco appears from the shadows in matching leather, guitar case in hand. Heavy-set. Short and swarthy. Brooklyn accent that snaps. Curly black ringlets cropped unusually close to his head for a metal musician. “You know I’m only in this band for the free booze, right?”

“Aren’t we all?” Billy sets down the amp to receive a fistbump. “Nice hair, Fonz.”

“Gets fuckin’ hot in the summer, kay blondie? Got tired of sweating.”

“Just wondering if you thought this was an audition for Grease.” Billy passes dry humour. Looks over the new hairdo to *tsk*, shaking his head. “Nick’s panties sure are gonna twist when he sees you. We’re all about our curated image now, remember? Your hair is your bond.”

“Aww, panties gettin’ twisted? God knows that’s already a struggle in those jeans.” Dark eyes scan over Patricia. Thankfully *not* in a perverted way. “This ya girl?”

“Excellent question.” Billy looks at her, teasing spark in his eye. “Let’s hear her thoughts on that.”

Way to put her on the spot. She clears her throat. “Tonight, I’m all yours.”

“Ooh, I like that.” He picks up the amp again. “Trish, Rosco. Rosco, Trish. You guys fill in the rest, this shit’s fucking heavy.” He turns to

back into the alley door, disappearing from sight.

Patricia looks down to give Rosco a handshake. Likes the enthusiasm in his eyes. "Nice to meet you, Rosco."

"Good to finally meet the chick my boy never shuts the fuck up about. Matter-a fact, I'm sick and tired of hearing about ya." He scampers over to the back door of The Whiskey and bellows down the hall. "Hey Bill-ay! She makes you look like *shit* ! Don't fuck this one up, ya dickhead! Hey! Hey you! What, you deaf or somethin'? Come here you candy-ass, cologne-dick motherf-" The door shuts behind him.

Patricia turns to Dave laughing. "Isn't *Billy* supposed to be the trash-mouthed pirate in this group?"

"Nah, Rosco definitely takes that title. Gotta mouth bigger than his head." Dave glances down at another heavy amp, twice as big as the last. "I know you're in heels but, could you...?"

"I've got you." She secures Billy's drumsticks in her purse, bends to pick up a side. "Where's Nick?"

"I'm guessing in the bathroom cavorting with his one true love, Lady H." Dave muses as they carry. "But...it's pre-show so maybe he's dallying with Mistress China White instead. At least, he better be. Last thing I need is him falling asleep on stage."

It's a bit disturbing how he hopes his lead singer is snorting coke instead of shooting up smack, almost laughing it off. Though something in his eyes says that's entirely out of necessity. "But there are record execs here tonight. He should be here and ready..."

"He'll show up on stage right after I play the first note. Just watch." Dave gives a jaded shrug. "Gotta hand it to him. For a guy that can't inhale from his nose unless there's white stuff going up it, he always manages to appear at the right moment. And most importantly, he *always* kills it. Guess that's all that matters in the end."

He has a point. When Nick is onstage, he's dynamite. Never misses a beat. Sings pure and crisp. A great frontman that any band on The

Strip would want.

Doesn't mean she likes him one fucking bit though.

*

Nick shows up at the perfect time as predicted. Like clockwork, right after Dave plays the first note. Bursting onstage to huge applause. And yes, he kills it. They all do. An amazing set.

Cameras flash. Panties are thrown freely. Tits are exposed in droves. Guns and Roses stand in the audience, watching. They've clearly made it on The Strip. Stars taking their rightful place in the dingy trash heaven that is The Whiskey.

She's never been so proud.

The group comes off stage and Billy's all over her. Sweat-slick. Untamed. She catches a contact-high from him. Turned on by the feverish adrenaline that explodes after he's played. Can't stop touching him, on some strange drug of adoration. Walls brought crashing down by the cannon of Billy's sex appeal.

Afterwards, at the bar, Cat's Eye is gifted multiple rounds of whiskey shots. Well, at least three of the members are. Nick's disappeared to sate himself elsewhere of course. Patricia declines taking his shots for him, knowing she has to get up for work tomorrow. Feels left out because the energy is getting pretty wild without her.

And she knows it's only going to get wilder.

Rosco hands Billy a full bottle of Jack Daniels before leaving for his next gig. Makes her apprehensive because Billy's already past tipsy.

"I'd say take it easy, but it's The Whiskey and I guess you should enjoy it." Patricia ruffles Billy's damp head of hair. "I'm gonna go talk to Guns and Roses now. Saw them head backstage. Want to see if I can get a scoop."

"Better come right back. Not gonna let Axl steal you away."

"Trust me. Not my type. Slash though?..." She gives him a teasing

kiss. Tastes the heady sting of liquor on his tongue.

Patricia spruces her makeup in the crowded women's restroom. Re-applies lipstick a shade of tart cherry-wine. Re-tucks her sparkling lowcut black top into her leather skirt. Has to walk around a couple humping each other against a stall to exit.

She hunts down and captures Guns and Roses without any fuss. Axl hiding behind dark sunglasses, trying to pick her up while she makes sure to mention his girlfriend every few minutes. Slash emerging half-way through, undeniably drunk, asking her if she's seen his top-hat. Gone missing.

They give a decent interview and she tries very hard to forget that this may not even end up in Live Wire. That the next issue may never happen at all. Why ruin a perfectly good night with that horrible reality?

She gets her fill. Leaves the backstage area to find Billy in the hall. Stands there gawking for moment because what she sees sends a piercing blade through her.

Billy's leaning against the wall with his arms around two buxom blondes in skimpy bikinis. A third blonde snapping pictures. Takes her a moment to even realize that he's wearing a certain missing hat.

Billy spots her and grins wide. Ditches the girls to rush towards her. She yelps as rough hands wrap around her waist, pick her up off the floor to spin around before pushing her into the wall. He reeks of whiskey, sloppy mouth pressing all over hers.

"Missed you, baby," he slurs. Completely wasted. Ridiculous in his tall, black top-hat.

Patricia scans the blondes behind him and notices his name written in red marker all over their bare hips and stomachs. More daggers lancing her gut at the sight. "Having fun with your new friends?"

"Pushy chicks..." He glances over his shoulder. "Wanted me to sign their tits. Met em' halfway."

A slight relief, but that he touched them at all still nags. She taps the

brim of his hat. "Billy, Slash is looking for this. Don't think he's going to be too happy to see you wearing it."

"Fuck him...shouldn't leave that shit lying around. Come n' fight me, Slash."

She raises a brow at that. Seems like it can't end well.

They make their way back towards the stage to check out the next band. Billy teeters on his feet, arm weighing heavy around her, whiskey hitting him hard. Looks like she's both moral and physical support tonight.

It's about this time that Dave appears stumbling out of nowhere. "Hey guyyys." He wraps an arm around Patricia's shoulders so that she has to carry two dizzy drunks "Let's party!"

"Ah!" She nearly falls over. "God, you guys are *plastered*."

"That was some strong-ass whiskey." Dave leans into her. "Whiskey at The Whiskey. Did they put some extra alcohol in there? 'cause *whoops* ...think I'm drunk..."

"No, really?" Patricia grunts.

Billy's distracted by her big hoop earrings. "Like these dangly things. Pretty."

"That's nice, Billy."

"And...that thing you did with your eyes..." He takes in her artful makeup. "...that flicky whatever. Cool. Wha's that called?"

She smiles. "It's called a cat-eye."

"No way..." Billy stares for a moment. "Wanna fuck?"

Patricia bursts out laughing. "No . Not here."

"Bathroom?" His eyes are dead serious in through their stupor.

"All the stalls are taken, if you know what I mean." Dave sighs

miserably next to her. “Just missed my chance. He was the hottest thing too...”

Patricia realizes then that Dave’s used to getting his reward after the show just like everyone else.

Good for him.

*

Patricia and her two drunks lurch towards a dark rounded booth where Nick sits with arms sprawled over the seat and legs spread wide. Dead cocaine eyes. Ego stinking up the whole table. She’d pass right by if her hangers-on weren’t so damn heavy.

“Aw, would you look at that? Adorable.” Nick coos at the drunken sight as Billy slides next to him. “Digging the hat, man. You and Rosco starting your own band? New looks all around.”

The tension is already high. Nick oozing toxicity. Billy keeping a possessive arm around her. Dave quietly staring into his next drink.

“You were great up there.” Patricia doesn’t know why she’s being nice to Nick. Regrets it as soon as she starts. He doesn’t deserve it, even if true.

Nick shrugs. “Felt natural.” His breath goes suddenly short. Shifting in his seat. Eyes fluttering. A slight moan from his lips.

Weird. Maybe it's it's a drug thing.

Patricia turns to her partner in crime, currently nuzzling into her shoulder. “You alright there, compadre?”

“You’re so cool...” Billy crushes her to him, mumbling sloppily in her ear. “And smart. N’ tough. But.... gotta good heart too..”

So he’s a mushy drunk. “Thanks.” She pats his hand around her arm.

“M’ lucky to know you, cool girl.”

“Cute.” Patricia warms at the persistent flattery. “Drunk as fuck, but

cute.”

He keeps rambling. “You’re gonna be famous, Trish. Serious... everyone’s gonna know your name and I’m gon’ be like...”tha’s my girl.” ”

She feels suddenly far away from the grit of this underworld. A pink, sparkly bubble surrounding them in the rat’s nest. “Stop.”

“No.” He breaks out in a big grin. Then his breath sharpens. “Mm..wha-that tickles...” Patricia follows his bleary eyes downward to get shocked. A sharp pin to her precious illusion.

There’s a head of platinum blonde hair under the table right between Billy’s legs. Red lacquer nails grazing up his inner thighs towards his zipper.

Billy squirms hazily. “Do I know you?”

“Hey!” Patricia slaps the manicured hand away. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

A haggard-pretty face peers up at them. Dark eyeshadow that glitters. Some high, drunk girl in a black bikini. “Nick said-“

“I don’t *care* what Nick fucking said.” Patricia leans to glower. “Beat it, bitch.”

The girl gets the message. Crawls out from under the table and scurries away, ass and back glistening like the rest of her. An oiled up groupie wobbling towards backstage.

Patricia feels a flicker of pity then. Hopes the girl doesn’t get too wasted in a snake-pit like this.

“Oh come on, Daisy, we were just getting started!” Nick cackles, slim hips lifting to do up his zipper. “What’s the matter, Patricia? Don’t think your boy-toy deserves some love? Cruel.”

She makes a face of disgust. “You’re a pathetic little pig, Nick.”

“Just sending my favourite drummer a well-earned present.” He

glances over at the drunkard in her arms. "Got her just for you, buddy. She was just your type, wasn't she? Thought I nailed it."

"Fuck off..." An uncharacteristically weak comeback from Billy. Though to be fair, coherency isn't his strong suit right now.

"Dick move, man." Dave breaks his silent streak. Sloshes his drink towards them. "Y'know he's gotta girl with him tonight."

Nick offers an innocent pout. "Just wanted things to be like old times."

Patricia's brows furrow at that last comment. She tries to somewhat shift the conversation. "Tell me something. Why is it always the guys getting blown under the table? One-sided bullshit. Never see any women getting serviced around here."

Nick leans towards her. "All you had to do was ask-oof!" He clutches his shin, grimacing. Billy's handiwork. "Asshole!"

Then there's a blood-curling scream above the already deafening loud music. The whole table looks over to find the next band, Red Empress, throwing raw meat into the crowd. People backing away from the front of the stage in terror.

She's had enough.

"I think it's time to go." Patricia grabs Billy's hand to pull him out the booth. Stands to say farewell. "Bye Dave. Nice to see you again. Nick? Fuck you." Her middle finger raises.

They leave before there's an answer. Patricia feels testy as she drags Billy through the crowd. Girls making eyes, brushing against him as they walk past. Like she's not even there. "Boy, you sure are popular tonight. Can't take a fucking step without you getting molested."

"Like it when you take control like that, baby." Billy chuckles as he hangs off her, lips moving against her cheek. Zero understanding of personal space. "Protectin' your man from the groupies...hot."

"Yeah. Would have been interesting to see what you would have done if I wasn't there."

"I'd...tell her that I already got blown by a blonde beauty today." Billy spills the truth. "A way more...beautiful beauty." His smile dazzles.

"Mediocre save, Casanova. Four out of ten."

"M' serious..." He frowns.

They stop outside the women's washrooms.

"I'm gonna leave you here for a few minutes, Billy. Don't go anywhere."

"Lemme come with..." He clings to her arm.

Patricia grins. "Whiskey really brings out your needy side, huh?"

"Jus' horny."

"Don't. Move." Patricia places her hands on Billy's broad shoulders. Positions him against the wall outside the door before turning to leave. "I'll be right back." She looks over her shoulder just to make sure he's still standing there. Sees him leaning, smirking at her with half-cast eyes. "*Stay*."

There's a line-up for stalls when she gets inside, girls clamouring around the mirrors to tease hair and paint faces. She taps her toe, waits with her arms folded, glancing at the washroom door. Can't help but worry about drunk Billy. That she'll catch him surrounded by more blonde groupies, doing a lot more than just posing for pictures.

Is tonight a preview for what the future holds for them? She already hates it.

After what seems like hours, Patricia finally gets a stall. And again, there's the smack of fucking in the stall next to her.

"Way to make the line-up longer, guys!" Patricia says loudly, searching in her bag for a tampon. No reply but laughter and more pounding. "This place is a fucking garbage can."

When she's zipping up her skirt, she hears a snippet of conversation that makes her take pause.

"So, did you see the drummer for Cat's Eye, tonight? Hot, right?"

Patricia zones in on the source through the too-wide gap in the stall. A redhead and a brunette in front of the bathroom counter. Tight jean miniskirts, hair blown out to maximum height. Leaning in the mirror to apply thick layers of fluorescent makeup.

"Hell yeah." The brunette flicks dark locks over her bare shoulder. Adjusts ample cleavage under a canary yellow tube top. "My friend, Lisa, fucked him a couple months ago. Big cock apparently. Knows how to use it too."

"I'm so gonna chat him up." The redhead smears burgundy lipstick on pursed lips. "Feeling lucky tonight. Got my special panties on."

Tube-top girl smacks her gum. "I dunno, heard he's seeing some chick now. Some blonde slut. Typical bimbo, but what else is new?"

"I wouldn't stress about it. From what I hear, that guy's open for business twenty-four hours, seven days a week, girl or no girl. I'm pouncing. You don't get dick like that everyday."

A bright blue bubble balloons and pops. "Give me a turn after?"

"What are best friends for?" The two girls high five, cackling over their scheme.

Patricia stays frozen in place as she watches the duo leave. Opens the stall and goes through the hollow motions of washing hands and checking makeup. Red lips now a pale wash of pink from Billy's mouth.

She leaves the bathroom. Stands outside and scans left and right, heart sinking.

He's gone.

*

Patricia can't find Billy anywhere. Searched high and low, every place she could think of. Audience, backstage, bar, washrooms, front entrance. Dave hasn't seen him either. A pit of nausea forms in her stomach and stays there.

So he showed his true colours after all. Just another pussy-hungry cheater. How could she be so stupid? Literally just left this type of mess to hop right back in. She could slap herself.

Patricia leaves through the back of The Whiskey, pushing through a group of smokers to walk home in heavy-gray doldrums. Ready to take a long, sad shower and never talk to Billy again. Heart blistering with resentment.

Then she spots a leather-clad blonde down the shadowed alley, a woozy gait as he approaches her. "Billy?"

Billy staggers into the light. Hatless. Nose dripping fresh blood. "Took it back...."

"Oh my god! Billy! Are you okay?" She takes his face in her hands. Reaches in her purse to retrieve a bar napkin. Wipes at his nose and upper lip until white soaks deep red. "You fought Slash?"

"Axl...little dude..." Billy mumbles. "Gave'm a shiner...hah..."

Patricia squints at him. He's somehow dizzier, sillier, words thicker. "Are you-did you drink more?"

"No..."

"Don't lie, Billy. Who gave you more booze?"

He sways with a smirk, reaches in his jacket to pull out a silver flask. "Slash."

Patricia rolls her eyes, snatches the bottle away from him and shoves it in her purse. "We are going the fuck home. Where are your keys?"

He shakes his head, making a face. "No way m' lettin' you drive my baby..."

"Well you sure as hell aren't driving!" She grabs at his leather jacket. "Give them to me."

"No ." Billy squirms as she paws at him. "Lemme go..." She pats him down. Digs inside his front jean pocket. He gives a suggestive chuckle in response, pulling her to him for a bear hug. "Mmm, you're dirty, baby."

Patricia escapes his hold with keys in hand. He swats for them and she deftly sidesteps. Grabs his wrist to drag him down the alley. "You're coming with me."

"Nuh-uh. Les' dance." Billy forces her to twirl before he backs her into the brick wall of The Whiskey. Hands sliding firm up the back of her bare thighs. "Beautiful girl..." He plants a big, wet, boozy kiss on her. "Taste so sweet..."

"You taste like a *distillery* ." Patricia yanks relentless fingers out of her underwear.

Just then the dumpster next to them starts to moan. More of that moist slapping sound Patricia can't escape tonight.

No.

She cranes her neck and sees a couple banging in the garbage.

"Are you fucking serious!" Patricia goes shrill in horror, wrenches out of Billy's grasp. "What the hell is *wrong* with you people? You guys are fucking disgusting!" She kicks the dumpster and it grunts back.

Billy's laughing like a maniac, unsteady on his feet. "Wanna go next?"

"No! We are going home and I'm driving and you're gonna shut up and let me!" She's way past her limit now. Patience shot to hell. Drags Billy stumbling by his leather collar to his Camaro across the busy street, his powerful body oddly pliant in his stupor. Though it does seem that he's getting a naughty kick out of her manhandling him.

"Sexy when you're all...yell-y...keep doin' that."

“Shut up!”

“Yeah , jus’ like that...” Billy grins as Patricia pushes him against the car.

“Don’t sexualize my rage!” She furiously unlocks the passenger side. “Now get in and do *not* complain.” She grabs his shoulder and shoves him into his seat.

The sleazy vibe changes when Billy realizes he’s not in the driver’s chair.

“Ughhh, so wrong...” He sinks into the Camaro’s leather like a petulant toddler. “Don’ like this...”

“I *said* no complaining.” Patricia rounds the car to get behind the wheel. Immediately feels like a tourist. She has to admit, there is something very weird about taking his spot.

Also, she’s not used to driving the busy Strip at night. A colourful circus taking up every square inch of space. A wild party going on in the streets, as well as the venues.

She revs the engine, feels the vibrating purr under her feet. “ *Nice.* ”

“Don’ fuck this up, Trish...” Billy moans. “She’s...my life...”

“We’re fine.” Patricia pulls out onto jam-packed Sunset Boulevard. A scantily clad girl sprints in front of them and she slams the breaks. “Just fine.”

Billy sighs in anguish. Goes silent watching her for a moment before switching gears completely. Humming some kid’s song to himself. Sounds like... *Old McDonald Had A Farm* .

She snorts at his bizarre choice of tune. Peeks to find him fishing in the glovebox. “Looking for music, Billy?”

“What?” Condoms spill everywhere on the floor. He just stares, fading in and out. Seems to have forgotten what he opened the compartment for.

“You’re a *disaster* .” She leans over at a red light to clean up the mess.

Billy winds limbs around her, yanks her to him with that strong grasp. “Gimme a kiss...”

“Billy, no.” The light turns green and he won’t let go. Cars honk behind her as she tries to break out of his hold. “Billy!”

“ *Mwah*. ” He presses a wet one to her cheek. Releases her and lolls back in his seat with a snicker.

Patricia hits the gas, knuckles tight on the wheel, muttering in frustration. “This is completely insane. I’m never letting you drink this much again.” She looks to see his head nodding. “And for the love of god, don’t pass out on me. I have to get you into my apartment.”

Billy’s head jerks upright to look out the window for a stretch. Humming loudly again before abruptly turning to her. “Les’ make a baby.”

“What!” She laughs in surprise. Flushing crimson. “You are so wasted.”

“No ’m not...wan’ you to have my baby, Trish.”

“Billy!” Patricia almost dents the car in front of her, breaks slamming. “Shut the fuck up. Jesus Christ.”

“Wanna give you...ten fuckin’ babies.” He leans to slur in her ear. “Come on, les’ make one. Right now.”

“Oh my god .” She slaps a palm over his big mouth. “Stop talking!” A warm-wet tongue steals out to lick her skin and she yanks her slobbery hand back. “Ew.”

“You’ll be a good momma. Jus’ know it...”

She nearly has a heart attack with that one. “Stop!”

“ *Whyyy?* ” More toddler attitude.

“Because you’re scaring the shit out of me!”

“Les’ get it *on* .” He sinks into his seat again, chuckling with his eyes closed now. Delirious. “ *Let’s get it onnnnnn*. ” He breaks out in a Marvin Gaye croon.

“Yeah, like you’d even be able to get it *up* right now, you goddamn looney-tune.”

“....wanna find out?”

“No!”

They park on the street in front of her building. She drags him out of the car and into the empty lobby. Thanks her lucky stars that the elevator is working again. Can barely hold him upright as they ascend to the fifth floor.

“You’re really not helping me out here. It’s like you’re actively *trying* to be dead weight.”

Billy’s not listening to a word. “Hey cutie.” He presses a finger to the bridge of her nose. “ *Boop* .”

“I can’t *believe* this is happening.”

The elevator opens and she manages to haul him into her apartment. Enters her bedroom with exhausted relief. Pushes him onto the bed. Yanks his boots off and has to stop him from rolling right off the mattress.

“Now go to sleep, drunk-boy. And don’t throw up.”

“Ughhh...c’mere.” He sprawls with a groan, reaching for her. Eyes heavy-lidded.

“No. You’ll smother me to death. I’m going on the couch.”

“Wha?” He gives the most cranky scowl. “Don’ leave.”

Patricia can’t turn that pout down. “Fine. Just for a few minutes.” She plops on the bed, lays on her side next to him so they’re facing each

other. "Now go to sleep."

Arms immediately snatch her close. Bind around her waist to hold tight as predicted.

"M'not gonna. Christ's sake, Trish, les' have a fuckin' conversation." He proceeds to squish his face into her cleavage. Rests there, breath fanning hot against her skin.

Patricia pats his head with a sigh. "You're hilarious."

"Could die happy here..." He makes a small moan of pleasure, head turning so his cheek lays on her breast. "Can hear your heart beat." Eyes stay closed, breathing getting slower.

She finds herself pushing his hair back. Can't stop herself from kissing his forehead, his blonde brow. Holding him closer to whisper. "Why are you so cute right now?"

There's no answer. Just a gentle exhale as he falls fast asleep in her embrace.

A field of lavender dreams enfolds her not long after.

Notes for the Chapter:

Let me know what you think below or on my tumblr
♥♥♥ thanks again!

13. suspicious minds

Notes for the Chapter:

This one popped out pretty quickly so I'm posting!

The next morning, Patricia delicately jostles Billy awake. Has to resort to that tactic because words haven't worked yet.

He mumbles incoherent gibberish at her touch, thick lashes stubbornly glued shut. Buttery light caressing bronzed skin. Still wearing that black leather jacket. Devilishly gorgeous, dark edges contrasting warm honey.

Beauty that burns. Breaks hearts. Sharp, shameless and impossibly bittersweet.

But...softer now. A shade more vulnerable. Boy-like in peaceful slumber.

She can't stop staring.

"Billy." She shakes his shoulder a little harder. "Billy, wake up."

"Huh?" A streak of perfect blue as lids peek open. "Hey, baby..." They close again, still shot with sleep.

Patricia's hand drifts to cup his face, thumb grazing his cheekbone. "Billy, I need you to wake up for just a sec."

He groans, squints at sunlight like it hurts. Rubs at his blinking lashes. "Am I dead?"

"Practically."

"What the fuck happened last night?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" She smooths her hand down his chest now, skimming tight white cotton. The twitch of muscle. Wasn't expecting to enjoy the process of touching him awake so much. Strangely addictive.

“Uh...” He drapes an arm over his eyes, still not quite alert. “Waiting for you outside the washroom.”

“Well, congrats. You fought Axl Rose.”

“Fuck.” Both hands cover his face, voice muffled. “Did I win?”

“That remains to be seen.”

“What time is it?” He groggily turns to the bedside table.

“A little after seven A.M.”

“Jesus, why-“ Billy looks at Patricia fully to see her dressed in formal work clothes. A crisp white blouse tucked into a black pencil skirt. “Oh yeah. You’re the weekend warrior. How many hours of sleep did we get?”

“Like, three?”

“Shit.” He jerks upright to his elbows. Looks dizzy. “Do you need a ride?”

“There’s no way you’re not still a little drunk.” Patricia pushes him back into the pillows. “Plus it’s only like a fifteen minute walk if you take a shortcut. I kinda like the walk, actually. Did you... want to sleep in?” She originally was going to kick him out. Can’t bring herself to now.

“Uh...fuck yes?” He snuggles deeper into her pillows.

“Well, you drained the entire bar last night, so I’m not surprised.” She smooths back his hair. “It’s a short day for me. I finish at one. If you want to stay til I come back, you’re free to. Well, you kinda have to because I only have one key and I need to keep that door locked.”

“That’d be great. Thanks, Trish.”

“New TV works. Help yourself to the fridge. Aspirin is in the bathroom. Coffee’s in the kitchen cupboard. The real shit too. Not that instant crap, so you’re welcome.” She hops off the bed to finish getting ready.

His sleepy gaze follows her across the room. "Uh oh, you're not one of those bean snobs, are you?"

"Only about instant coffee."

"Fair enough."

"Oh and Billy?" Patricia leans in the vanity mirror to check her hair. "Don't ever drink that much again." She offers a serious look at his reflection.

He cringes. "That bad?"

"You were...a handful and a half." She puts on a silver hoop earring. "Not exactly fun dragging you around. Major man-child energy."

Billy gives her guilty eyes. "Sorry, haven't blacked out like that for a long fucking time. Guess I got carried away. Playing The Whiskey and everything."

"You freaked me out. It's like you were this...out of control trickster. Slippery too. Lost you for a good half hour and then when I found you, you were in an alley with a bloody nose."

"Fucckkk," he groans. Hand sliding down his face. "Alright, it won't happen again."

That was fast. "It won't?"

"Promise," he nods. "Would prefer that I remembered my night with you. Kind of embarrassed to be honest. I'm really sorry."

"Huh." She's startled at how easily he apologizes. Especially compared to past lovers. "Thought you'd get mad at me."

"Why would I get mad?"

"Sometimes people get defensive about their habits."

He frowns at her. "It's not a habit. It was a mistake."

Derek said that once. Makes her go cagey again. "I want to trust you,

Billy. I really do.”

“You can. I swear.”

“Prove it to me over time, alright? I have to go.” She grabs her purse from the edge of the bed. “Bye.”

“Hey, come here.” He pulls her back on the mattress, shifts her in his arms to spoon her tight. “You smell so good. Like...honeysuckle. And coffee.”

“New perfume and I just drank a cup.” She writhes as he kisses her neck. Can feel him getting hard. Doesn’t know how on earth he’s horny after last night’s excess. Maybe the hangover hasn’t hit him yet. “Billy, I’m going to be late.”

“I’m loving this little outfit you’re wearing. Very professional.” He runs his hands under her form-fitting skirt. Sweeping up her inner thigh, towards the junction between her legs. “You know, if you wanna sit on my face for a few minutes-“

“ *Billy.* ” She pulls his wandering fingers away, already sweating. “I seriously can’t be late again.”

“Fine. I’ll let you go.” He kisses her cheek a few times as his hold loosens. “Gonna miss you.”

Patricia sits up, legs dangling over the edge of the bed. “Will you actually?” She turns to give him a skeptical once-over.

“Yup.”

“More than just for sex?”

He takes a moment, then looks her dead-on. “Well, you’re fuckin’ sexy and I’m only human so...I’d be lying if I said sex wasn’t involved. But even without it, I’d miss you.” He takes her hand in his, smooths his thumb over her knuckles. “I like being around you for *you*, Trish. Hope that’s obvious.”

Patricia realizes then just how much she needed to hear those words. “You know, I never thought you’d ever say anything like that

when I first slept with you. You put up a big front.”

“So do you.” He kisses her palm. “You are the definition of hard crust.”

“Is that another way of saying I have good boundaries?”

“Nope. But when I warm you up a bit, you’re all gooey in the centre, aren’t ya?” Billy lightly pokes her chest, aims for the heart. A smile in response as she gets up to find her shoes, purse flinging over her shoulder. “Hey, one more thing.”

“What’s that?” Patricia bends to put on a black heel.

“Do you wanna go surfing this week?”

Blazing excitement at the thought. “I’d love that.”

“Cool.” He folds an arm behind his head. “We should go sometime in the early morning. Pick you up right before dawn.”

“Why so early?” She approaches the bed. Leans to hover over him, palms on the mattress.

“Less people. Less waiting around. Less humiliation when you fall flat on your ass.” He reaches for the back of her neck. Softly guides her down to his level. “Plus the sunrise on the water is somethin’ else.”

Patricia makes a face of mock hurt as she descends. “You’ll be there to catch me, won’t you?”

“You’re a big girl. You can take a tumble.” Billy meets her mouth for a burning-slow kiss. Still tastes like whiskey. “Have a great day, baby. I’ll be waiting.”

A rush of erotic imagery at his tone. “And what are you going to do while you wait?”

Knuckles stroke up to caress her cheek. “Miss you.”

That’s when Patricia melts to goo. Goes back for a second kiss. Then a third. Wonders if she’s picked up second-hand drunkenness when

she goes in for a fourth.

She misses him right back for her entire work-shift. Can't snuff out her obsessive feelings. Her desire for him. Her dreamy euphoria.

Nor can she ease her worries.

*

The next evening, Patricia visits Amy for much needed girl talk. A glass of wine while watching chick flicks and giving each other pedicures. A monthly ritual.

Amy's apartment is huge. A sea of soft pastels, crystal, porcelain. Lilac and lily. All arranged with tasteful, mature elegance. Not one thing out of place. It makes Patricia feel like a grubby child visiting her upper class aunt. Inferior in comparison to all this finery. Amy never rubs it in though, always treats her like they're both swimming in the dough.

Patricia lays seated on a cream-coloured sofa cushion. "Thanks again for the TV, Amy. Was getting hard to watch Golden Girls on a smashed screen." A rueful smile as Grease plays in the background. Something about hot summer nights.

"No problem, love." Amy pours a glass of sparkling white wine next to her. "Still can't believe Derek turned out to be a complete psychopath."

"Me neither." She takes Amy's foot in her lap. Quickly changes topics. "I have some news."

"Good news hopefully?"

"Don't know yet." Patricia shakes a bottle of sheer lavender nail polish. "But I'm dating our one-night stand now. Think it's officially happening."

"That's so great, Pat!" Amy places her glass on a porcelain coaster. "I had a feeling about you two, *especially* after he rescued you. I'm sorry I couldn't be the one to do that, but, I guess it was meant to be."

Patricia shakes her head. "Nothing is meant to be, Amy. Shit just happens."

"I disagree. I think everything is meant to be. Like me and Thomas for instance. I think he might be like...my soul mate or something? Crazy, I know."

Patricia can't help but be judgemental. A week after Scott comes Thomas, another rich man, and she's already planning their wedding in her head. This always happens. Amy is addicted to love.

"Isn't it kind of a bit soon to think that?" Patricia applies the first coat to Amy's pinky toe.

"I know it seems fast. But my parents got married after a week of knowing each other and they've been together twenty six years, so I think it's safe to say that it's never too soon. Sometimes you just know, you know?"

"No, I don't know. I don't think I've ever known. And when I thought I did, I was wrong. Like, the most wrong one can be, so. Until it happens I remain on the fence."

Amy's face falls. A reminder of her relationship with Scott perhaps. "You're always so pessimistic, Pat. It's like you never have any hope about anything ever. How can you go through life like that?"

She shrugs, focused on Amy's foot. "Well, hope leads to disappointment and I'd rather save myself the trouble. How can you already be so optimistic? Aren't you like....hurt? Mad? Mad at men?"

"I think I just have a very resilient spirit. And life is more painful when I expect to get hurt at every turn."

Maybe she just hasn't been hurt enough. "Guess I'm wired differently. I'm already having doubts about this new guy."

"Billy."

Just hearing his name makes her heart pound. "Yes. *Him*. Tagged along to watch him play at The Whiskey. Big show. Big name bands. Lots of hot half-naked chicks and he sort of...signed his name on a

few of them.”

“On the chicks? Where on them?”

“Their stomachs. Hips. Kind of threw me.” She finishes the first coat of polish. “Apparently they asked him to sign their boobs and he didn’t so...I dunno. He was also pretty drunk. Does that show self-restraint?”

“Hmm I guess?” Amy takes a sip of wine. “I’d probably feel uncomfortable about it too.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t consider that weird? Is it only going to get weirder from here on out? Other foot, please.”

Amy switches legs. “I don’t know, I guess you’ll just have to wait and see.”

“I don’t want to wait and see. I want to know whether or not I’m putting my eggs in the wrong basket. Which reminds me, that same night he...told me he wanted me to have his baby.”

Amy nearly spills her glass. “Oh my gosh!”

“He was black-out drunk though so I don’t know what to make of it.”

“That’s actually kind of romantic.” Amy gets a wistful look in her eye.

“More like insanely over-the-top and invasive. All of which he tends to be when smashed. Romantic did not come to mind at all.”

“It’s totally romantic! He wants you to be the mother of his children. Subconsciously, at least.”

“ Or maybe he just wants to spread his seed as far as it will go. Maybe he wants to have a harem of women to give his babies to.”

“I wouldn’t even think of that.”

“And even if he *does* want me to have his baby, that’s still scary to think about. We’ve barely dated at all. It’s all so fast. He moves so, so fast.”

“You’re so suspicious! It’s not like he told you that sober. And really, it’s not like he’s actually done anything wrong.”

“Yet.” Patricia takes a heavy breath. “Amy, he’s constantly surrounded by temptation. A girl literally tried to blow him right in front of me. And he just got all confused and barely pushed her away. I had to do it. Mind you, he looked about a second from passing out.”

“I see.” Amy purses her lips in thought. “Well, turn the tables in your mind. If you were super duper drunk, and a guy sexually harassed you, would you necessarily know how to react?”

“Maybe not. It was just so hard to gauge anything. I don’t trust him when he’s drunk. I especially don’t trust the people around him when he’s drunk. I don’t trust this entire scene one bit.”

“Did you tell him that?”

Patricia starts working on the second coat of polish. “Sort of. I told him I didn’t like him getting wasted.”

“And what did he say?”

“That he’d never get drunk like that again and that he was embarrassed and really sorry.”

“Well...what more do you want?”

Patricia leans over to pick up her glass of wine. Swallows sparkling white-gold. “I dunno. Maybe for the clouds to part and a message that says “Billy is trustworthy” to light up as big as the Hollywood sign?”

“Good luck with that.”

“-because the waiting to find out takes too long. Maybe he won’t cheat now. But what about a few months from now, or a year from now? He’ll slip. It’s the rock and roll lifestyle. Some hot girl will come by and inevitably steal him away.”

“I think a hot girl has already stolen him away.” Amy wiggles dark brows at her. “He seems smitten to me. Like, the way he’s helped you

out so much, how he keeps pursuing you. Men don't do that unless they're invested. And from what I remember he did *not* seem to be this loyal at all. But with you? Seems like he's going above and beyond his norm."

"I dunno, guys in the past seemed to care until they didn't. We'll see what happens." Patricia takes another sip. "He's taking me surfing this week."

"That is so cute. He's the little surfer-drummer boy."

"More like crazy drunk boy that secretly wants to impregnate me."

Amy laughs at that. "Well, that's why you take the pill."

"True." Patricia pauses. Sighs before she finally confesses. "I really, really like him, Amy. Like...maybe even more than I felt for Derek when we first dated." It sinks so much deeper when she says it aloud.

"Took you long enough to tell me that. Was starting to wonder why you were going out with him at all."

"And..." Patricia winces. "-he said he's never been this crazy about any girl before."

"Aww!" Amy turns to swooning mush. "So enjoy the ride! Be happy."

"Last time I really, really liked someone they turned out to be a lying, cheating scumbag. With a taste for cocaine."

Amy holds her hand, eyes sympathetic. "I think this guy's gonna be different. I really feel it, Pat. In my heart. And I've got a good instinct about these things!"

Patricia holds back from bringing up Amy's instincts about Scott. "Well. One day at a time."

Amy leans to clink glasses. "Cheers to that. So-" She leans in close. "if you were my bridesmaid, what color would you like the dress to be? I'm thinking pastel pink."

*

That night, after showering and getting ready for bed, Patricia receives a phonecall from Billy.

“Hey, Trish.” Billy says her name with a rasping lilt.

“Um. Hi!” Her mouth goes ash-dry, pulse quickening. Somehow talking to Amy about him tonight has opened floodgates of clammy-palmed anxiety. Now painfully aware of her girlish crush. “What’s up? Is something wrong?”

“No. Just felt like calling.” A lingering pause. Awkward. “Is that okay?”

“Oh. Yes, of course. Well, that’s nice.” Patricia’s tongue-tied. Guys rarely call her just to talk. A moment of euphoria before she gets suspicious. “Did you call to have phone sex with me?”

“ No. ” Billy snorts. “Unless you want to, of course. Just wanted to hear your voice.”

Patricia’s heartbeat blasts in her eardrums. “Well...cool.” More awkward silence. “I’m looking forward to our surfing thing.”

“Me too.”

“Though right now...kinda tired. Just about to hit the hay.” An excuse to get away from blushing nervousness. Intimacy. Can’t stop thinking about his drunken offer to procreate.

“Alright, well. This is just a call to wish you goodnight then. And uh...to apologize again for being a total fuckwad at The Whiskey.”

“It’s fine,” she shrugs. “Shit happens.”

“Yeah, it does. Just never like that again.”

She goes quiet for a beat. Taken by how he keeps reassuring her. “You’re surprising.”

“Good surprising or bad surprising?”

“Just...surprising. Anyways, thanks for calling. See you Thursday before work?”

“Bright and early, baby,” he purrs. “Hope you like getting wet first thing in the morning.”

“Ah, there you are.”

“Force of habit.” He gives a warm chuckle. “Night, Trish. Sweet dreams.”

“Goodnight, Billy.” She hangs up. Immediately regrets saying goodbye so soon. Him calling just to talk makes her wish she *did* get hot and heavy with him over the phone.

The phone rings again and her stomach flips in eager delight.

Patricia picks up fast. “If you wanted to have phone sex, you could have just said so.”

There’s a long pause. Grated breathing in her ear. She knows right then and there it’s not Billy.

“Pat? It’s me.”

Ice down her spine. Bitter cold. Spiralling like a dark, glassy whirlpool. “Derek?”

“Hey, doll-face.” His tone is overly frothy. Saccharine-sweet. A strong contrast to Billy’s rough velvet.

Patricia has to sit down on the sofa because her legs are about to give out on her. Light-headed. Feels like she’s going to hurl.

She sucks in air to steady herself. Then turns to stone. “I broke your guitar. It’s mangled in a dumpster now. And I’m not sorry.”

A tense silence like he’s holding back from freaking out. “You changed your locks.”

“You came here *again* ?” She glances down at her hand, realizes she’s shaking.

“Twice.”

Patricia can't breathe for a moment. Suffocated. “Derek...what you did. What you're doing. So incredibly fucked up. Like, I can't even think of words to describe how pissed and hurt I am. I don't even know how to speak to you right now.”

More silence. “The cops came by.”

“Good!” she snaps. “And let me guess. Daddy sorted that out for you?”

“He doesn't know. Cops won't prove anything anyways. Not like I'm on their records. Not like they took my fingerprints.”

She can't stand his smug tone. “Well, how wonderful for you. Must be a real breeze being able to do whatever the hell you want without any consequences.”

“Look. Pat. I was high. Really, really high. On speed. And...” His voice trembles out of nowhere. Frail and tear-filled. “I need help, Pat. I really need help.”

Patricia takes a beat to respond. Wonders if he's pulling crocodile tears on her. “And what makes you think I'm going to be the one to help you, Derek?”

“Because you're always there. You're always there when I need you. And I need you, Pat. I'm so fucking lost without you. I need to see you again.”

“I really don't think so. I don't even know why I'm still on the phone with you right now. I must be insane.” It's like being sucked into a black hole. She just can't seem to hang up.

“Why won't you talk to me? Why can't we just make love and put this all behind us?”

“Make love ?” She scoffs. An alarm in her sounding off. Voice rising to a frenzy. “Derek, you wrote “whore” over my bed! You *pissed* in my fucking bed! You destroyed my whole apartment! There's a hole in my goddamn window! And I'm seeing somebody! This is *done* . We

are beyond done.”

He sniffs like he’s holding back tears. Voice cracking. “I’m scared.”

“What are you scared of? That you might actually have to face the repercussions of being an asshole?”

“I’m scared that I’m never gonna be okay again. That I won’t be able to get better. That I’m going to get worse. A lot worse.”

The way he says that sends visuals of that nightmare back to her. Blood in the sand. Poor naked, bleeding Derek. “I’m...sorry you’re going through a hard time.” She chides herself mentally for the empathy. “Not my problem though.”

“Will you meet me in person?”

Patricia pauses. “For what purpose?”

“I’ll pay for the damage on the apartment,” he offers. “And, if we can’t be lovers anymore, then maybe we can be friends.”

Fuck. She *does* need the money. Doesn’t know if she can bring herself to look him in the eyes though. “Derek...I don’t think I can see you again or ever be friends. You fucked this one up hardcore. I don’t know if this is something I can get over. I don’t forgive you. Or even want to.”

A shallow gasp. Close to bawling. “I’m afraid I’m going to hurt myself,” he snivels. “I’m really depressed. I’ve never been this depressed before, Pat. I’m worried.”

Patricia hates how she’s sorry for him. How he can twist her around his little finger with his *pity me* bullshit. Just like how he did during the last legs of their relationship. Crying and begging. How he reminds her of Ma’s worst days. When she clutched and held Patricia in their cockroach-plagued apartment, high as hell, sobbing that she was sorry for being such a terrible mother. Just a small, starving ten year old in an addict’s leeching embrace.

What if no one’s there to help when he needs it most? What if all he needed was someone to care? Thoughts that compete equally with

her disgust.

"Fine. I'll meet you for the money. At least five hundred bucks." She keeps her voice poised despite hating herself. "But it'll be in a public place. Ten minutes tops. And you *won't* touch me. If you touch me, I'll scream. I'll file a restraining order. Actually, I've been considering a restraining order all week. One more cruise by my door and it will definitely happen."

More teary breaths. "Can't believe it's come to this..."

"Really? You seriously brought this upon yourself, Derek." She pauses to collect herself. "I'll meet you at the coffee shop Thursday at noon. The one we used to go to."

"Okay." Derek snuffles. "Miss you, Pat."

She goes stiff with repulsion. Funny how words can hit so differently depending on who's saying them.

"Bite me." Patricia slams the phone in the cradle. Vibrating with tension. A horrible feeling like her energy's getting sucked right out of her. Like she needs to wash rotting filth off her skin. Unclean.

She takes another shower and assures herself that getting paid for damages inflicted is perfectly reasonable. Over and over and over again until the water runs freezing cold.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks again for all your comments/kudos/support.
Means a lot to me!

Tell me your thoughts either here or on my tumblr



14. parasite

Notes for the Chapter:

This one got more intense than I anticipated but these characters write themselves!

Hope you enjoy?

Dawn at the crux between Hermosa and Redondo Beach. Waves coming in thick and fast. A deep pink horizon against a lapping ocean blue. An empty shoreline.

Patricia straddles a neon purple surfboard, legs dangling in chill water. Floating next to Billy on his own baby blue board. Watching him watch waves. Waiting for the opportune moment to catch a ride. Something deeply intimate about just the two of them at sea.

“These waves are uh-intense.” She scans the roiling water for something she can handle. Grateful for knee-deep slosh before the massive waves in the distance. “This section is *not* for beginners.”

Billy keeps sharp eyes on the horizon. “Thought you said you’ve done this before.”

“I said I was mediocre at best. Meaning, I can get up on the board and fuck around for a few seconds. Never rode anything more than knee high.”

“You’ll be fine,” he assures. “Just gotta get in there. And being thrown around will help you learn fast.”

Oh no, he’s one of those *just do it* people. She was hoping for hand-holding.

“I never imagined us wearing wetsuits.” Patricia glances down at sleek black fabric.

He bites his bottom lip in concentration, still watching the ocean churn. “I’d rather not lose my shorts today.”

Patricia snorts at his focused intensity. In the zone. She touches his arm, cocks her chin towards a set of tiny cresting waves. "What about these waves here?"

"Those are lil' baby ones." He frowns at their pathetic height. "For babies."

Her eyes roll heavenward. "Guess I'm a big baby then."

"Okay." Billy shrugs. "I'll watch you catch one. See where you're at."

A rush of anxiety at that. The reality of a hot, experienced surfer watching her fall. "You watching me makes me less likely to catch it. Can't we like...go at the same time? You can surf the big ones over there and I'll stay over here in the baby section."

"Trish," he chuckles, "how can I give you pointers if I can't fucking watch you?"

"How about you go first. Show me how it's done." More stalling.

"Alright." Billy shoots her a beautiful grin. Glances towards the distant surf to see a set of huge waves, cresting blue and frothing white towards them. "Check this shit out."

Billy lays flat on his board, back poised. Strikes strong arms into water, paddling fast through the baby section. Pushes up onto his feet in a single, quick motion. Glides silky-smooth over a wave so tall and dark, it makes her gulp. Skimming across the lip of it. A style flashing and easy. Grace and fire.

He returns to her. Golden hair still dry. Quirk of a smile on his lips.

"Damn." She gulps as he sits next to her. Their boards floating and bobbing against each other. "That was extremely intimidating."

"It was nothin'." He leans to kiss her. Tastes salty-sweet. "Now. Ride the lame one first, *baby*." A taunting edge to his voice.

"Not making this easier with the trash talk." She bristles at his teasing. "Now I feel all self-conscious."

His brows furrow. "Sorry, sweetheart. Was just kidding." Apologetic kisses press to her cheek. "I get kind of feisty out here. You should see me and Dave when we surf. It's not pretty."

"Well, I'm *not* Dave. Just promise to be nice to me, okay?"

"That was shitty of me. Sorry. I'll be sweet as can be." An arm reaches around her shoulders. A forehead kiss. Wetsuits slick on each other.

Patricia lightens up at his apology, his touch. Spots another set of small, foamy waves. Perfect height.

She goes through the motions, laying flat on her belly to paddle out. Hands pushing at her board for a pop-up. Rusty and awkward. Thankfully her soles find their way on the board fast and she rides the edge for several seconds. The water breaks and she braces herself as she falls. Cool ocean waking up any lingering sleepiness in her bones.

She paddles up to him sheepishly.

"You downplayed yourself." Billy gives her arm an affectionate touch.

"But I fell," she frowns.

"Yeah, and your pop-up needs some work. But once you got up on the board, your feet and form weren't half bad. Like I said, you just need to get out there and fuck up a bunch. You'll get there in no time."

Patricia smiles at his encouragement.

He nods towards the next series of knee-high waves. "Now do it again."

"Bossy, are we?" She splashes water at him. Turns and paddles back towards the next wave. Does another sloppy pop-up.

"Bend your knees!" Billy cups around his mouth to call out.

She rides a few more waves and gets progressively better each try.

The push-up to stand getting a bit more smooth, though her arms are starting to tire. She attempts to go for bigger waves, chickens out half-way several times, plummeting into water over and over.

Billy paddles over as she bursts gasping to the surface. "You're too afraid to fall, which is making you miss your shot. You gotta commit. No hesitation."

Patricia slicks back wet hair from her face. "Don't you ever get afraid?"

"Sometimes it's fucking terrifying," he admits. "I've almost drowned a few times. But you gotta love the water more than you're afraid of it. Until you feel that, you're never gonna conquer the big ones. You're gonna fall a lot, Trish, so learn to embrace it. If you're too scared to take a tumble you're never going to have the ride of your life."

"Huh." She climbs back onto her board. They sit, floating side by side again. "Very wise, surfer boy."

"That's some damn good advice, by the way." He rubs her back. "I wish someone told me that when I was a newbie."

"When did you start?"

"Mom gave me a board when I was seven. Been an ocean dweller ever since."

"You're a natural."

Billy shakes his head. "Just got two decades of practice under my belt. You're doing good, Trish. Just gotta keep coming out here."

She realizes then that she definitely wants to.

"What if I tried a big wave today?" Must be his risk-taking aura influencing her. Suddenly anything's possible. "Just to try."

"Ooh gutsy." He nods appreciatively. "Wanna give it a shot?"

Reality hits her. "Will I fall?"

“About a ninety-nine percent chance,” he grins. “But don’t let that stop you.”

Patricia stares at the next giant wave coming in. Like something out of that old Japanese print. Taller than villages, curling at the edges. Milky-aquamarine. She gets a tremble in her belly. “Actually, I don’t think I’m ready.”

Billy’s already gone, chasing the one she’s too scared to ride. She watches his serpentine style, board twisting. His form disappearing behind a crystalline wall of blue, tunnelling through to peek up again on the other side.

She feels like a wooden soldier in comparison. Stiff to every jut of water and wave. He’s so relaxed in there. Right in his element. She’s not sure she’s ever been that natural at anything before.

“One day,” she says absently. “One day I won’t be afraid to fall.”

Billy paddles up to her with a happy sigh. Cocky smile blessing those lips. “Almost fell on that one.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

He closes the space between them to kiss her again. Ocean salting her tongue. “But you felt good for a second, right?”

“You’re such a showoff.”

“Especially around you.” Another sea-salt kiss.

Afterwards, they walk across the sand, boards under their arms. Sun rising higher. A growing mass of surfers passing by them. Billy had the right idea. They missed the crowd.

“Hey, when’s the next issue of my favourite zine coming out?” Billy steps over glossy-green seaweed. “Noticed it hasn’t hit shelves yet.”

She winces. A week into September and she hasn’t even *started* putting together this month’s issue of Live Wire, terrified of the consequences. “Um...I’m taking a break.”

“Yeah? Too much on your plate?”

“Things are just nuts at work right now.” No lie there.

“I get that,” he nods. “I mean, that’s a lot of effort for one person. I say take as long as you need. Not like you’re getting paid more than pennies, right?”

A flood of relief. “So fucking true. Except, the letters from concerned fans are starting to roll in. Calls from the music shops too. All very disappointed in my tardiness.”

“Fuck em’. You don’t owe them shit. Tell them to start paying if they want the goods.”

Patricia beams at the blunt support. A weight off her chest. “*Thank you* . Really needed to hear that.”

“I got your back, babe.” A silent beat before Billy nudges her. “Hey, I’m gonna be in Hollywood around noon today. Gotta carpentry job not far from your work. Wanna meet up for lunch?”

Right during her dreaded meet-up with Derek. Her heart-rate speeds up. “Uh, I can’t. Super busy. I’ll probably be eating while I type.”

“Oh.” Billy clicks his tongue. “That sucks.”

“Just one of those weeks...”

He gives her an easy smile, cements her guilt. “Some other time.”

*

Meeting with Derek feels clandestine. An illicit act.

At noon she sits and waits in the Hollywood cafe Derek and her used to go to. *Projection*. The one she *stopped* going to in fear of running into him. A trendy place with royal blue walls and bad, overpriced paintings. Cute little tables and snug couches. Hip people, hipper menu items. Derek’s choice.

Derek would always sit back with a cappuccino while she drank drip

coffee across from him. Talked and bragged and bitched while she nodded and soothed. Patted his hand. His ego. Polished his feathers so he could shine. The perfect, doting girlfriend. His fawning doll.

When she looks back, it's bizarre how unlike herself she was with him. How much she shrunk and shaped her whole identity to suit what he wanted, so infatuated because he said he loved her and bought her shiny things. Ma *always* said to marry a man that bought her shiny things.

Derek got a big shock when her hard side came out after she caught him cheating. Hated the rough edge she had tucked away for his benefit. Suddenly she went from doll to "tyrannical bitch."

If she played the doting doll for Billy he'd sniff it out in a heartbeat. Could he sniff her out this morning when she lied to him?

Derek enters through the cafe door, steals her breath from her. Dark and fragile. Far too thin in designer leather. A disturbingly beautiful skeleton. The ending of her nightmare keeps coming back to her. Derek's weakness. Derek's wounds. Derek's blood. Pale and gaunt and helpless.

When he spots Patricia, her entire body spasms in the most ugly way. A sharp beam of disgust. Animal instinct to flee. Reminds her of the beginning of her nightmare: Derek the demon. An empty-eyed monster that laughed as she wept.

Derek slithers up to her table, his skin pastier in the light with every step.

"Babydoll." He bends to hug her and Patricia abruptly pushes him away.

"Do *not* touch me," she warns.

"Yeah, okay. Yeah." He nods with a frenetic jerk as he sits across from her. Sniffs loudly, jaw grinding.

"You're high."

"Just had a little bump." Dilated eyes lower. "No big deal."

God, it's like they're right back where they left off. All the countless times he told her that. A broken record. "Whatever. Just give me what I came here for." She needs to keep this exchange short as possible. Take the money and run.

He reaches into his leather jacket. Slides a white, bulging envelope towards her. "Here's a thousand."

Patricia's eyes widen. "You're not working for your Dad anymore, are you?"

"No." More jaw grinding.

"So did your dad lend you...?"

"I don't have to ask my dad for every little thing!" he snaps. "I have other ways."

Her chest tightens at the sudden outburst. "Okay..." She takes the envelope. Peeks inside. Green hundreds ripple as her thumb grazes across.

"I want us to be friends." A cold, clammy hand grabs hers. "Really need your help."

A wave of pity and nausea as she carefully pulls away. "Derek, I'm not going to be the one to help you, okay? I'm sorry."

He runs a violent hand through his hair. Huffs. "I'm not going to rehab."

"Why not?"

"Because it's *tacky* ." A snide little note at the end.

Of course. Derek was always about appearances. He'd rather hit rock bottom than do anything *beneath* him.

They sit silently across from each other. Derek's knee vibrating under the table. Back of his hand wiping across his nose. Eyes hollow. Perfect picture of an addict.

“How did it get this bad?” she blurts. “Why? You had everything going for you. Literally everything. I don’t get it.”

His elbows lay on the table, hands continuing to run through greasy dark hair. Pulling at it. A strange tick he seems to have developed since they last saw each other. “Because I’m nothing.”

“You’re not nothing, Derek. Nobody’s nothing.”

“ I am.” His tone goes dark and sullen. A brooding little boy. “Everything I’ve tried, I’ve failed. Or gotten bored of. I’m not good at anything. I don’t think a girls’ ever liked me for anything but my face.”

She wasn’t expecting an answer like that. So brutally honest. Not Derek’s style.

“I did,” Patricia says softly, “I loved you.”

“I know, babydoll.” He takes both her hands in his. Can’t seem to get the message. “Because no one else could ever make you feel special like I did. No one ever loved you.”

She snatches hands away again. “You’re wrong. I won’t let you pull that shit on me anymore.”

“Then tell me, why did you love me?”

She takes a heavy breath. Doesn’t know why she’s still here to answer.

“I saw this...child in you that I adored.” In a horrible way she still does. Wants to reach out and hug the damaged boy in him. Given everything but real affection. Distant parents, a barren mansion, deep emptiness. Poor little rich boy. All alone.

“But did you love me as I am *now* ?” His tone goes sinister. “I’m not a child anymore, Pat.”

She’s being sucked deeper and deeper. Getting emotional. Pulled into a conversation she was supposed to leave as soon as he handed the money over. “I wanted to. I wanted to so much. But you cheated on

me. You hurt me. Why?"

"Because I was an even bigger nothing with you."

A piercing sting. "What do you mean?"

"You're one of those *driven* chicks. Tried to have a bigger dick than any guy around you. Do more. Be more. Get ahead. Always felt like I had to compete with you, Pat. At least with some stupid slut I could feel like I was better."

"You never told me that." Her stomach turns, suddenly ill.

"Well, now you know. You won. You always did. And I hate you for it. I hate you."

Pain sears despite intentions to feel nothing. Thrown by a merciless riptide. Mashed against sharp coral, jagged rock. "You said you loved me..."

"I hate you just as much," he seethes. "Especially now that you're whoring yourself out. I hate *him* too. I hate anyone that looks at you. Touches you. You were mine. In my mind you still are."

She finally snaps to awareness. Realizes how out of control this is getting. How far down the grotesque rabbit hole he's gone. Her fingers inch towards her purse, eyes on the exit. "Then you never loved me. That isn't love."

"I loved having you be *mine*."

"Derek, that's sick."

"Maybe it is sick. But that's how I felt. How I feel." He pauses to sulk at the floor. Glances up with a petulant look, asking her to pity him. "Do you hate me now?"

"I don't know." She stands up, chair screeching behind her. "Do you realize how toxic this is? You need help. Professional help. Now goodbye, and don't ever come by my apartment again."

She turns to leave, feels him get up to tail behind her. Heart lurching

up her throat, goosebumps down her arms.

Derek follows her outside the building. Switching to a sickening whine. The same tearful voice from the phonecall. "This is why I need you, Pat! Because you always know how to talk to me. No one else would be real with me like you are now. I love that about you."

She looks behind to see that ghostly face and picks up speed. Heels clipping. "Don't follow me! You're scaring me."

"Pat, come back," he begs. "Just want to be your friend." All the bile he spewed at her now forgotten.

She spins to face him, body trembling. "No, you don't! You want me to praise you, and tell you you're going to be fine and you don't need therapy! All you want is the ego boost, just like how you always did."

"Don't leave angry, doll." A whimper. Pathetic.

"Stop calling me that!" Her hands ball to fists as she yells. People in the street pause to gawk. "I wasn't even a person to you. Just a doll you could fuck. Pull a string and then I'd open my legs and tell you anything you wanted. Well I'm not your doll anymore! Why don't you learn to become someone you actually like instead of twisting my arm to feel better about your shortcomings!"

Derek stops to hiss. "Why are you being such a loud bitch? I fucking care about you!" Eyes dart nervously at their growing audience.

Patricia points a shaking finger at him. "Don't talk to me! Don't follow me! I don't care how fucked up you are or how much help you need!"

She turns, glances behind as she storms away. Relieved to a cellular level that he's no longer tailing her. Just standing still to stare holes through her back.

Patricia only makes it a few yards before she halts in her tracks. Hears it before she sees it. An engine rumbling. The dark blue of a Camaro parking on the side of the street up ahead. A muscled arm draped out the window, cigarette smouldering between fingers.

Her gut flips as she closes the gap between them. Peeks inside to see Billy sitting there tan and strong. Dark shades hiding the intense focus she feels on her.

Billy removes his aviators. Reveals a gaze clear and steel-like. Glances between her and Derek down the street. "That guy bothering you?"

Patricia swallows at his dark expression. At her being caught. "Billy, I can explain-"

"You okay?" Stern eyes flick over her. "Who is he?"

"I'm fine..." She says it so weakly. Feels humiliated at him knowing she lied. Seeing her spaz out in the street. She glances cautiously behind her, afraid to answer his last question.

Billy follows her line of vision. Sees Derek staring. Unmoving. Watching. "Get in."

Patricia quickly circles the Camaro. Billy glaring in his side mirror as she sits down next to him. Pale eyes blazing hotter than the cherry of his cigarette. Jaw clenched. "Who the fuck is he?"

Patricia takes a shallow breath. Looks through the back window to see her ex glowering at them as he opens the door of his shiny-red convertible. Stops there to keep watching. "Derek."

A volcanic explosion. The taste of blood. A match to gasoline.

Billy takes a violent drag from his cigarette. Flicks it to hot pavement. "Motherfucker..." The Camaro door bursts open, boot landing hard on the sidewalk.

"Billy, wait!" Patricia grabs his arm before he bolts. Fingers digging deep into muscle. "Don't freak out at him. Please don't."

"Psycho needs to be taught a lesson." Billy grits out, gaze still skewering into Derek.

"Don't." She desperately pulls at him. "I don't want to watch you guys fight. Just please don't. Please."

Billy stills himself, nostrils flaring. Bloodlust barely restrained. Watches Derek drive away before he slowly shuts the Camaro door.

"I should have told you I was meeting up with him," she croaks. "I'm sorry."

Billy keeps his sight on the busy street. "Why did you lie to me?" A tinge of hurt in the question.

"He wanted to pay me back for the damage he did." She shows Billy the thick envelope. "I needed the money. I didn't want you to worry about me." Or tear Derek limb from limb. Even after his frightening display, she's never had the taste for bloodshed.

Billy takes a careful look at her frazzled state. "He said some twisted shit to you, didn't he? Got you all upset."

"...he's just really troubled." She finds herself defending her tormenter in the smallest voice. Some soft pacifist in her bubbling to the surface. "He needs help."

"Troubled my ass. What the guy needs is his teeth knocked in. Now he's going to think there's no consequences for what he did."

"Billy, this is why I lied to you about seeing him. I knew you'd get pissed about it and I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I just want to forget about this. Can we let this go, please?"

His tone stays low and clipped. "Can't stand to see you shaken up like that. Asshole needs a fucking wake-up call."

"That's the last you'll ever see of him. He's out of my life now." She hopes to God that's true.

Billy stares moodily at the horizon.

"Are you angry at me?" She touches his shoulder.

Billy exhales slow to calm himself. "No. But I could bury him." His gaze touches over her. "Hey. You're shaking." He reaches for her shivering hand. Covers it with his own. "You alright, sweetheart?"

Her chest aches inside. She takes his face in her palms and kisses him. Doesn't know what else to say or do.

Billy kisses her hard in return, hand on the back of her head to deepen it. A shade of raw frustration in him. Tenderness underneath that makes her instantly weak, needy. Her arms wrapping tight around his neck, a sudden hunger to fuck the confusion away.

"Wait." Billy pulls back to look her dead in the eye. Voice both gentle and firm. "Listen. I'm here for you. Whenever you need me, whatever happens, I'm here. Want you to know that." He takes her hand and places it flat on his chest. "But *promise* you won't lie to me like that again. Especially about him."

"Okay." Overwhelmed with her palm over his heart. Voice cracking. An oath being taken. "I promise. I'm sorry."

Brows crease together at her distress. He presses a soft kiss to her lips. "Just want you to be safe. Can't watch out for you if I don't know what's going on."

"I'm safe now," she murmurs.

"I would have come with you to get the money." Spoken slowly. A pull to pay attention. "That's not the type of guy you should be talking to alone, Trish. He's fucking dangerous. One look at him and I could see that."

She gets a strong visual of Billy beating Derek in the middle of a busy cafe. Kicking and punching. Derek's brittle-thin limbs breaking under Billy's power. Not sure she could ever bear to watch.

"I wasn't alone. It was a public place. Plus I was with him for a year and he never hurt me. At least, not physically."

"Still, I don't trust him around you. Not after what he did. Not after seeing him today." He tucks a blonde strand behind her ear, shaking his head. "Scary, the way he looked at you. Something fucked up in his eyes. Sick. Like...he'd do anything."

That last line gives her chills. "It's over now." She takes his hand in hers. Kisses it. "I won't talk to him ever again. I'm staying far away."

“It’s not you staying away from him that I’m worried about, Trish.” He looks out the back window, like he can still see Derek watching them. “It’s him staying away from you.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading! Share your thoughts down below



15. rock 'n roll fantasy

Notes for the Chapter:

These two definitely embrace their inner slut in this chapter, so a big heads up for shameless smut here.

Hope you enjoy!

A week later, Cat's Eye plays The Glitz. The club with the eternal pink glow. The club Billy ran out of to chase Patricia down the street a month ago. A heated argument that nearly made her weep. Made her run away to Vegas.

Funny how fast things change.

Now she's front row in the eager audience to cheer him on. A wink sent her way from behind the drums lit up as pink as the neon sign out front. Dave breaking into a new opening riff so nasty with distortion, the crowd goes nuts without ever hearing the song before. Drums and bass come in after just as intense.

Sheer ecstasy to her ears. Notes so perfectly grimy the hairs at her nape stand up. She waits for Nick's entrance guaranteed to make the crowd explode.

Except, Nick's still not here.

In fact, he doesn't show up for the whole first song. The rough tune turning into an instrumental exploration. Band members looking worriedly at each other. Billy playing his usual raw style but something overtly mean about it. Dave still managing to impress the audience with a series of mind-bending solos but his mouth set in a harsh line.

When the opener finishes, Dave goes over to the drum kit to exchange tense words with Billy and Rosco. A quick conversation that ends with Billy nodding grimly. Hard blue eyes shooting Patricia a look that screams *why am i not surprised?* before sticks hit skins at a furious pace.

Thankfully even without Nick they're entertaining as ever. The crowd dancing and jumping. The energy still high. But despite their smooth cover, she knows this is bad. The first major sign of the inevitable.

Patricia chews at the straw of her rum and coke as she watches the cleverly-hidden disaster. So on edge with anxiety for them, that she doesn't notice a bald man in a smart suit approach her.

A gentle tap on her shoulder. "Hello there, my name is-"

"Not interested, dude." She expects this to be some sort of pick-up routine. It usually is. She's learned to shut them down pretty fast. Deeply annoyed that he's interrupting her focus on the unpleasant turn of events.

The man leans to speak above the music. Smells expensive. Has a mellow-rich voice that tranquilizes. "You don't even know what I'm going to ask you yet."

Patricia keeps eyes zeroed onstage, irritated that Corporate Dude is still hitting on her. "Whatever it is, I don't care."

He presses on. "You're Patricia Des Barres, right? You write Live Wire?"

That he said her full name catches her attention. She looks at him curiously. " Yes? "

"I'm Barry. Barry Moore." He extends a warm hand to her. Solid and large like the rest of him. A full two heads higher than her. A round face like the moon. Not typically handsome yet oozes charisma in black. "I'm a producer for MTV. I think you might wanna stick around for what I'm about to say. Want to talk outside for a minute?"

Patricia nearly drops her glass. She shakes his hand with a palm now damp with perspiration. "Uh...sure..."

Barry guides her towards the alley exit. Patricia glances behind at Billy, now watching her leave with some strange business man. A look of confusion on his already vexed face. She makes a gesture to say she'll be right back. Knows it looks weird.

Barry opens the back entrance for her. Warm late-summer air greets them first, then pungent weed smell from a circle of stoners nearby. Garbage from down the alley.

“So...” Patricia folds her arms, “how did you know it was me?”

“I saw a picture of you in Live Wire.” Barry offers her a Camel cigarette and she takes it. Lets him light it with an amber-gold zippo, her fingers unsteady around the filter. “The one where you’re standing next to Motley Crue. I must say, you caught my eye. I knew right away you were something special.”

“Really?” A shock of blush singes Patricia’s cheeks. “I can’t believe anyone would notice me in that one picture. I can’t believe you’ve read my work.”

Maybe she should start believing. She knows Live Wire is a cult sensation. Just never pictured the mainstream noticing.

“Oh, don’t be shy, Ms. Des Barres. No one interviews names like Motley Crüe and Def Leppard without knowing they’re doing something noteworthy. ”

She shrugs as she takes a drag. “If I made a damn buck for it, maybe it would sink deeper.” Smoke blows past his head.

Barry lights up his own Camel at that. Inhales smooth like he’s done this since birth. Like he’s quite used to offering cigarettes in the shadows, talking business in alleys. “How would you feel about making a lot more than a damn buck? Like lets say ah- *ten thousand* damn bucks per month? And that’s just to start.”

“Wha-?” Patricia chokes on smoke. Her hand clasps to her heart to prevent it from leaping out her chest. “Are you fucking serious?”

Barry grins ear to ear. Lapping up her overwhelm. “Picture this. Live Wire having it’s own weekly segment on MTV. A show every Sunday night, where you talk to bands on the Sunset Strip.”

Euphoria and shock hit first. Anxiety second. Hot ash drops onto her arm and she hisses, brushing it off. “Wow. Um. I dunno. I’m a writer, I like talking to bands, but I don’t know if I’d feel comfortable being

seen across the nation like that.” Her voice echoes foreign to her, strained with nervousness.

“I think you’d be a perfect fit for this line of work. The looks. The talent. Personality. No one else would be a better candidate. You’re a star, Patricia. Trust me. I’ve been in this business for almost twenty years. I know one when I see one.”

Patricia wraps both arms around herself like a scared child. Feels so exposed. “Uh...I uh- really don’t know.” She laughs at her own awkwardness. “Sorry, I’m not usually like this. This is a lot.”

“Here.” Barry tuts sympathetically. Reaches into his suit pocket and hands her a business card. Patricia turns it in her fingers. Black cardstock. Gold font. Clean-cut and high end just like him. “Take a week to think about it. I understand your hesitation. It’s a big step and your life will never be the same. I just hope you see that as a good thing.” He pats her bare shoulder with a nod. “Have a good night, Ms. Des Barres. I hope to see you soon.” He leaves her there out in the alley.

Patricia leans against the wall of The Glitz to stop from fainting.

She returns back to the pink-lit stage where Cat’s Eye is salvaging their oddity of a set. Nick’s magically appeared by now, singing with on-point bravado. They play at typically great form for the next hour. So clean it’s like the opening shit-show never happened.

*

Patricia finds Billy in the crowded backstage room, standing and talking in hushed tones with Dave. Nick nowhere in sight as per usual. They both spot her and Dave leaves with a courtesy smile so tight-lipped it makes her nervous.

“I’m going to fucking kill him, I swear to fucking god.” Billy sweeps Patricia into his arms. Sweltering-damp skin melting into her. “I knew he’d do that shit one day. Was just a matter of time.”

“You guys played great without him. Killed it even before he showed up.” She soothes him with a kiss, though she feels his pain. “To be

honest, I don't think anyone will remember."

"Especially Nick." Billy plops down into the nearest armchair with a groan. Lifts a leg to plant a black Doc Marten on the coffee table. Jean shorts riding up to show off muscular thighs. Bare chest glistening. Some shimmery pagan god.

He switches gears when he gets a good look at her. Frustration to lust. Bedroom eyes burning a trail down her skin as he scans head to toe. A brawny arm reaches out and pulls her onto his lap. He takes his time soaking her in, slow and sinful. " *Damn* , sweetheart. Have we met before?"

"I don't think so." Patricia laughs as she sinks into him, head curling into his shoulder.

A hand glides up her waist. Skims precariously underneath the cup of her crimson bustier. The same one she wore the first time she cornered Live Wire backstage. Warm lips touch her ear to rasp low. "Your titties in this top should be fucking illegal, baby. Couldn't take my eyes off you the whole damn show. Really fucked up my timing."

Patricia's hips can't help but undulate slightly against him. Flames rise in her belly at his hand smoothing down her hip. "Be a good boy and you might even get to see them tonight."

A naughty grin as the plush of his lips ghosts hers. Fingers slipping an inch under her short black skirt. "But something tells me if I'm a *bad* boy I'll get to do more than just see them."

Then a shadow casts. Dave standing over them to hand Billy a can of beer. Drops beading down the aluminum. Ice-cold in this muggy room.

Billy shakes his head. "Nah man, I'm good." Dave shrugs and passes the beer to some random groupie in lacy pink underthings. Patricia observes that decline silently, appreciating the cold turkey behaviour.

"So who was that suit you disappeared with?" Billy says a little too casually, tracing delicate patterns up and down her arm. "Didn't

think he was your type.”

A coy grin pulls at her lips. “Jealous?”

Billy scoffs. “No.” Then a flicker of a smirk. “Okay, maybe a little. Think it was the sneaking off into a dark alley part. Something shady about it. Secretive. I say just find a bathroom like everybody else.”

“Dumpsters are really in right now.” Patricia jokes before she gives him a sober look. “He actually offered me something big. Super big. Kind of overwhelmed me.”

Billy wrinkles his nose. “Gross, Trish. No need for details.”

“Not *that* kind of offer.” Patricia elbows his ribs as he cackles. “A business offer. He sort of...” She glances around, lowers her voice. “-wants me to be on MTV.”

Billy’s lips part, pretty with surprise. “Get out.”

“He’s a producer for them. Wants Live Wire to be it’s own TV show. Interviewing bands and stuff.”

“No fucking way.” Billy looks like *he’s* the one that got the offer. The glitter of sheer excitement on him. “You for real?”

She searches through her purse. Places Barry’s gilded business card between his fingers. “Yup. The suit wants me to join the capitalist enterprise.”

“That’s *amazing*, Trish.” Billy gawks at shiny, crisp font before kissing her cheek with pride. “Holy shit.”

“I know...”

“That is so. Fucking. Cool.” He shifts the card back and forth, makes the gold light up. “So when do you start?”

“Oh.” Patricia clears her throat. Stares at the amethyst sheen of her nails. “I told him I’d think about it.”

“Think about it?” Billy looks at her like she’s crazy. “Trish, this is the

opportunity of a lifetime.”

“But I feel weird about being on TV. I never wanted that. I just like to interview and write. I don’t think I’d be good at it. ”

Billy takes a moment to consider. Hands her back the card. “I mean, I *sort of* get that feeling. But you’re wrong about not being good at it. If anyone could do this job, it’s you. You know how to talk to people. You’re easy on the eyes. Smart. Sexy. You’re gonna kill it if you do it, Trish.”

An echo of what Barry told her. All tonight’s praise makes her go beet red. Antsy. “Thanks.”

Billy squeezes her to him, all smiles. “My girl making the big-time. Always knew you’d be famous, baby.”

Patricia peers at Barry’s card in her hand. Doesn’t know if her pulse starts in her heart or her stomach. Exhilarating fear at the thought of being on top of the world. A smouldering star. White-hot and oh so visible.

*

Later that night, Billy shows her Cat’s Eye’s practice space. A small abandoned building somewhere between Santa Monica and Venice Beach, covered in rainbow-bright graffiti. Run down and worn. An edge to it that is undeniably Billy.

“This is it.” Billy opens the door. Turns on Christmas bulbs to vaguely reveal a tower of amps reaching towards the high ceiling. A couple of seventies velour couches. Cement walls plastered with posters and flyers and neon spraypaint.

And most importantly, his drum kit. Half-lit in multi-coloured beams. So dark and so bright all at once.

“Very cool,” Patricia nods in approval as he guides her through the room, her hand snug in his. His body illuminated with surreal technicolor. “How often do you guys come here?”

“Well, ideally every day but...” He lazily twirls her, pulls her against

his chest. "It's getting less and less." He captures her hand and plants it on his still-bare shoulder. A palm presses the small of her back to push her into him, leading her in a slow dance out of nowhere. Soles against cement the only beat.

She laughs at first, then is cut short by the realization of how naturally they move together. Seamless. "And why's that?"

"It's weird." Billy maneuvers her around the hard floor. A gentle touch to contrast their harsh surroundings. "As the band gets bigger we're just getting busier with other things. We know the songs inside and out so I guess it's okay. I just end up coming down here alone a lot. Don't want to get rusty. Can't really keep my drums in my apartment with the noise and all. Like to practice at night."

"Such is the hazard of playing drums. They get fucking loud."

He tilts her back with a smile. Long lashes painted with a kaleidoscope of light. "I definitely do."

Then she rises up, like breaching water for air. Gets released at the surface. The enchanting moment over quick as it began, though she's still floating. "So, are you going to play for me?"

"Maybe." Billy stands in front of the drumkit. Thumb twined through the belt loop of his cut-offs. "Haven't played solo for a girl in a long time."

"Well, don't be nervous." She playfully cuffs his arm.

"More excited than anything else." He circles the kit to sit down on a little stool. Picks his sticks up off an amp behind him. Quickly breaks into one of those tight, fast fills guaranteed to send a jolt of electricity through her. Clear sound that pops. Just something to loosen his joints up but for her sparks fires.

"Play Stairway To Heaven!" she teases.

"Haven't heard that one." Billy grins. Already playing another steady yet intricate beat, never taking his gaze off her. He was definitely right about being able to play in his sleep.

There must be stars in her eyes. A billion pinpricks of adoring light. "You said that you had to try really hard but you don't look like you're trying at all."

"Well, I had to try pretty fucking hard to get to this point." The tin of a hi-hat. Cymbals crashing beautifully. The booming thud of a bass drum lacing underneath. Fast and feral. Then an abrupt stop. "Wanna see something I'm working on?"

"Absolutely."

"It's a bit sloppy but what the fuck." He cracks his neck, shoulders rolling. Proceeds to play something between a jazz rhapsody and a heavy metal explosion. Sloppy is without a doubt the wrong word.

Dirty-sweet. Savage. Pristine. Those words are better.

"Wow." Patricia just stares helplessly. Watches as he winds back down to a gentle four-on-the-floor beat. Wonders if he can see her fluttering pink heart balloon out her ribcage. "I love it. Is that going to be in one of your next songs?"

"I don't know yet," Billy catches a cymbal for a clean stop. "That's more Dave's territory. He's the maestro. We all just show up."

"You don't have much input?"

"No, I do. Just always run it by him first. That's just the way it's always been since highschool. Dave has a great ear. We sound the way we do because of him."

Patricia shakes her head. "I disagree. You sound the way you do because of all of you. Remove a piece and it's not the same. I'm kind of surprised someone as good as you doesn't put yourself out there more."

"Speak for yourself, Miss. I'm-not-good-enough-for-tv."

"That's different."

A sharp smile. "No, it's not."

He obviously won't let her win that discussion.

"Show me more." She wanders closer to him, looms over his shoulder. Immediately notices how thick his thighs are in his shorts. "I wish I could play an instrument. Seems like such a good release."

Billy makes a not-so-subtle glance to her breasts by his head. Then offers a drum stick to her. "Want me to show you some basics?"

"Uh. That's okay."

"Come *on* , it'll be fun."

She's going red yet again. Overwhelm is the word of the night. "More like, totally embarrassing."

"I've already seen you wipe out on a surfboard a hundred times. Can't be more embarrassing than that."

She smacks his arm lightly. "Mean!"

"Come on, sit down." Billy takes her fingers in his, draws her nearer.

"Where?"

He pats the thigh she keeps drooling over. "On my knee."

A zing of electric arousal at that suggestion. So strong she wonders if sparks just flew off her. "Okay..." She sits to straddle his thigh, bare leg on bare leg. Her groin pressed into his muscle, only silk panties as a barrier. Too erotic. "I don't think this is how you're supposed to play."

"Oh, I think it is." An innocent purr by her ear.

"But how can I hit the bass drum from this angle?"

"Good, you already know what it's called." He places the drumstick in her hand. "We're off to a great start."

"Is this how you learned back in band class?" She offers a wry glance over her shoulder.

“Yup,” he smirks. “I sat on Ms. Hooper’s knee and she showed me how to bang.”

“Of course she did. So where do I begin?” Her stick hovers vaguely.

“How about this. I’ll play the bass drum.” His foot hits the pedal a few times. Makes her bounce on his thigh. A firm pressure so sweet she gasps. “And you can play the toms.”

Patricia tries not break composure even as her nipples tighten, a flood of heat in her panties. “You have strong legs,” is all she can say.

Billy shifts his hand around hers. “Okay, I’m gonna show you the rhythm and you just copy that.”

She gives a nervous laugh. Sweating. “I have no rhythm at all.”

“I’ve seen you dance and I’ve fucked you. Beg to differ.” He moves her hand in a basic beat, fingers dwarfing hers. His leg starts bumping rhythmic and slow beneath her. Sends red-hot energy straight to her clit. “Think you can play that back for me?”

“Uh...” She swallows weakly. “Could you do that again? I zoned out for a second.”

He does just that, then takes his hand away. Rests it on her waist. She mimics the rhythm back but all she can think of is Billy’s leg pressed against her aching pussy.

“Good. Now do it again.”

They play the rhythm together, something so damn simple Patricia would have to be *trying* to fuck up the tempo. Kind of him to ease her into it. She’d appreciate the bonding of this moment more if she wasn’t so distracted by how obscene his bouncing thigh is.

“Again,” he orders.

“Again?”

“It’s called practice. You’ve got to do it til it’s second nature.”

She does it again, eyes fluttering as he moves underneath her.

“Again.”

“Okay.” More insistent pressure as they play.

“Again.” His arm curls around her waist to hold her closer. Energy shifting. Another easy beat. Another erotic grind between her legs.

Then a sudden stop. He’s the one who finally breaks.

“You’re soaking wet.” The hottest murmur in her ear. A relief but also catapults her arousal to unbearable levels.

“Am I?”

“You’re burning my leg, you’re so fuckin’ hot.” He feels beneath her skirt to explore under her panties. A soft groan at the gooey slick on his fingers. “This turning you on, baby?” He circles her clit. “Tell me how much it turns you on.”

For a moment all she can do is moan. “Too much. You totally had this in mind, didn’t you?”

“Now I definitely do.” He hits the bass drum to make her gasp. “Drippin’ all over me.”

“Can’t help it...”

“You know what would really turn me on?” He yanks her up his thigh. Her back pressed tight against the warm skin of his chest. A hand delves down her bustier to feel her up shamelessly.

“What?”

“If you came on my thigh.” Another few hard beats underneath her. “That’d be so fucking sexy.”

“Like...rub on you?”

“Yeah. I wanna see if you can get off.” He moves her chin to kiss her deep from behind. A soft bite to her lower lip as he tweaks her

nipple.

“I’ve never done that before.” Though something tells her it won’t take long to get there.

“Do it and I won’t make you play that drum fill again.” More sinful kisses. “Turn around. Wanna watch you come.”

Panties drops to the floor before she sits facing him, catching the molten lust in his eyes. Their flesh glows otherworldly under rainbow bulbs. Nothing but color and skin and heat.

She grinds against him, feeling his muscle flex under her. Her folds so delicate and sensitive against his hot, hard skin. She’s already getting there fast. As she leans forward to press her clit against him, he reaches behind her. Skims her silken-wetness before slowly fucking her with two thick fingers. Feels impossibly good.

“I had a fantasy about doing shit like this on the drums. About you. You sucking me off while I played onstage. Riding me til you came all over my cock.”

“While playing?” She trembles as his hand performs magic. “Is that even possible-“

“Shhh-“ he kisses her with a chuckle. “Don’t ruin it.”

More grinding. More consistent fingering. Her breathing goes shallow, the swift ascent of an orgasm flowing up her. Feels volcanic.

“Gonna come already, baby?” Billy pulls down her bustier for better access to her breasts.

“Been close since I sat down.” Her hips writhe as his other hand squeezes her tender flesh. His head leaning down to suck a nipple into his mouth. “God...”

She reaches to palm his hard-on through denim. Receives a growl in her ear for it. Gives her just enough spark to send her over the edge. Clutching at him as her body jerks and twitches. Then a collapse. Her head resting against his shoulder. Swimming with bliss. Tremors still in her limbs.

"That was beautiful." Shiny fingers rise to Billy's lips. Savouring her musk with wicked-slow flourish before he offers his fingers for her to suck. His tongue sweeps hers and she tastes herself twice. "Think you can do it again?"

She looks at him through a glorious haze. Still horny. "Can we try doing it for real?"

"Try?" He cocks a brow. "No way you're leaving here without getting thoroughly fucked."

"I wanna suck you off first." Patricia unsteadily lifts off his thigh, legs rushing blood. Slinks to her knees, grateful for the patch of carpet under the drumkit.

She unzips his shorts, his glistening-hard cock popping into view. Swallows him greedily. Loves the harsh groan from above. Her head bobbing as he grips her hair, pushes her onto him. An aggressive move but she only wants more.

"Yeah, come on. Take me, sweetheart. All of me." More firm pressure as she sucks. Minutes before he finally lets her pop up for air. Tilts her head back. "Wanna save my come for when I fuck you."

Patricia debates internally. She wants his come down her throat but doesn't want him to lose steam. "Fine. But next time you're letting me swallow." A few more hearty sucks at the head of his cock to make him tremble.

Shivers run up his legs. "I can deal with that."

Patricia stands to her feet. Doesn't know how she's going to ride him on that tiny stool without them both toppling over. She turns around, shimmies up her skirt. Squats between his open legs, hands bracing on his thighs. Breaks into a giggle at how awkward this posture is. "I don't know if this is going to work. Maybe."

"Shut up and sit down." The tip of him prods at her opening. "Goddamn, your ass from this angle..."

She slides down slowly he squeezes her hips. Stills half-way to adjust to him. A little whine at the impact of him filling her. "You're so

fucking thick.”

“Always so hot and wet for me, baby” He moans as she glides to the hilt. “Slippery, tight little pussy. Gonna take a serious fuck-fest to stretch you out.”

She writhes at that filth. Keeps pace. Up and down. Up and down, coating him with her gloss. Though her legs are starting to strain from the weird angle. No support besides his thighs under her hands. “I can’t do this for much longer.”

“Then get up so I can fuck you right.” A hard spank to her ass makes her comply.

They both rise and he spins her around. Hands seizing her thighs to pick her up, her legs winding tight around his waist. Walks her three steps to the wall behind the drumkit. Presses her against hard cement and buries himself inside with one slow and deliberate stroke. Fills her so perfectly in the dark.

Patricia can’t find her breath. Overwhelmed by Billy’s fire. Captivated by the trails of ambient light everywhere. Now burning brighter and brighter. Visions of fireworks where every bulb glows. Spellbound by color.

Then a sudden groan as she clutches at him. Tenses uncontrollably at the precise way he moves his hips. A gush of liquid-heat on his cock. Beauty and sin.

“Yeah, clench around me like that.” he grunts against her ear. The lewd sound of skin on skin filling the room. Getting sloppier as she gets wetter. “You’re so turned on, sweetheart.”

Hot, hard thrusts. A steady middling pace at first. Then intense, carnal pounding. Cement scraping at her back. Another orgasm hurtling towards her. Cells rioting pleasure. Prisms of fertile red and green. Flowering open.

“Oh my god...” A powerhouse of a release on the horizon, threatening to end her. “I’m going to die.”

“Then die.” He fucks her deeper. Sharper. No remorse. “Come hard

for me, baby. Moan like a slut. No one's gonna fucking hear you."

She dies a little death right then and there. Rainbows burst. Flesh and blood dissolve. A long animalistic cry from her lungs as she falls apart.

"Billy..." More helpless whining as he grinds into her to seek his own release. A savage frenzy before he explodes inside her just as hard. Chest heaving. His forehead resting against the wall beside her head. A few last slow thrusts before the whole world stops to catch a breath. The dreamiest pause.

"Holy fuck, Trish." Billy kisses her mouth. Her forehead. Pulls his softening cock out to set her down on the floor. Come dripping to concrete. Something so profane about getting kissed like she's holy and his seed running down her leg. "Think I died too."

After using panties to wipe away the mess, they laze on the velvety couch a few feet away. Completely ignored during their sex-capade. Patricia draping against him, tits still out so he can grope for comfort. Languid and satisfied. Listening to his heartbeat return to a normal pace. Limbs still getting sultry chills of pleasure. Forest fire settling to a cindery glow.

Then Dave whips through the door on a blinding yellow skateboard. Patricia frantically wiggles her bustier up over her breasts. Mortified.

"Oh. Hey you two." The skateboard kicks up into Dave's hand. "You guys look....sweaty." He gives them a shit-eating grin.

"Hey, bud," Billy just leans back with an arm around her. Chill as hell. "What's up?"

"Just came by to pick up my sweet Josephine." Dave grabs a magenta guitar off a stand in the corner.

Patricia laughs fuzzily. Feels drunk. Hard to keep composure with Billy's come still inside her. "You named your guitar *Josephine*?"

"You should see Esmerelda," Dave winks. Already moving back towards the door to give them space. He cocks his chin in their direction as he leaves. "Yo, Billy. Practice tomorrow night. Don't

forget!”

“Who do I look like? Nick?”

Dave gives him wary side-eye. “Lighten up on the Nick-bashing, alright? Hate feeling like I have to pick sides. See you tomorrow.” He exits through the backdoor, leaves tension in his wake.

Patricia peeks at Billy. “I guess he has a point?”

“Yeah, well...so do I,” he shrugs. Then let's out a sigh. “Don’t like you seeing this side of us. The fucked up part of Cat’s Eye. Guess you’ve seen it from day one though.”

“No intervention yet, obviously.”

“Nada. Everyone’s too afraid to piss off his royal *high*-ness.”

“Except you.”

“I’m pretty good at pissing people off.” Billy’s mouth presses to the curve of her cheek. “Might be the one thing in life where I don’t have to try.”

*

Back at Billy’s place, after a delicious round two, they lay back in bed. Smoke spiralling towards the ceiling as he lights a Marlboro between his lips.

“Maybe I should just take this MTV job,” Patricia muses. “Maybe you’re right.”

Billy stays quiet for a moment, then turns to her. “You know what, Trish? Fuck what I said earlier. I don’t want you to feel pressured to do anything that doesn’t vibe with you. No matter how cool I think it is.”

Brows raise at his change of heart. “Really?”

“Yeah, I was thinking...” He takes a thoughtful drag. “-people always used to tell me to compete in surfing competitions and stuff. And I

did a few times. But it wasn't my style, even though I made some decent cash from it. I just love doing my own thing. My way. Maybe you feel the same way about this." Ash flicks to his bedside tray.

That speaks strongly to her, though she's still on the fence. "I don't know what I feel. Guess I'll have to think about it more." She digs a hand into her hair. Massages her scalp. "I just hate my job so much right now, it's looking pretty damn tempting."

"That's another thing that made me want to say go for it. But...there are other jobs."

"I need to be honest with you." She shifts in his arms to look in that steady blue gaze. "There's more to me not working on Live Wire than having too much on my plate. Uh..." A glance downwards as her finger paints circles on his chest. "I'm kind of on the verge of being fired for stealing company supplies. You know, to make the zine."

Billy nods slowly. Takes that in without batting a lash. "I see. Well, that fucking sucks. Gotta say though, sweetheart-" A sharp inhale of smoke "-glad you told me. I was sort of wondering how you were pulling that off."

"Yeah," she breathes. "Am I a bad person for doing that? All that secret stuff? Stealing, technically?"

Billy chuckles, shakes his head. "If you're bad for doing that, I don't even want to know what I am." He shifts closer so their legs link. "Live Wire is probably a hundred times more interesting than any bullshit your work is publishing...so, in my opinion the ends justify the means."

"Glad you think so, though I don't think that matters to them."

Billy bites his lip to ponder. "Why don't you just quit before you're fired? Find another job?"

"Took me forever to find this one. The benefits are really good. The pay is enough to let me live in the cool part of Hollywood." She rests her cheek against his chest. "I was so close to being homeless last time I got fired. Took me months to get another job. I just don't want

to go through that again.”

“Fuck it. You can live here with me if everything goes to shit.”

Patricia smiles cautiously. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Of course not. If things go south, you’ll have a cushion. Don’t worry.”

“Thanks.” A touching offer but her stomach clenches at the thought of letting *anyone* be her cushion.

Billy pauses. Smoke exhales in lazy billows. “I bet that MTV job would pay you pretty good.”

An understatement. She doesn’t even want to tell him how much, it’s so good. “More than I’ve ever made in my life.”

“Still, money isn’t everything.”

“I can’t believe you changed your mind so hard on this.”

“Like I said, thinking of the surfing thing really put shit into perspective for me. Just because it’s there, doesn’t mean it’s for you. You should do stuff because you love it. And if making a zine is what you love, even if there’s no money in it, then...do that. Even if you have to downgrade to shitty pamphlets.”

“Would people still buy it though?”

Knuckles graze her arm. “I think they would. If all they cared about was glossy paper they’d buy Rolling Stone or whatever. It’s your interviews that they want. Your content. Your style. It’s not about the shiny package.” A pause as he snuffs out his cigarette. “Still, you should get paid for it.”

She stares, flickering over his honest face. Mouth parting speechlessly before breaking into a grin. “I like you, Billy.”

Soft eyes in return. “I like you too, Trish.” An even softer kiss.

They lay there in golden silence. The comfort of being with him- in

his apartment, in his bed, in his arms-is so palpable, Patricia can't help but wonder what it would be like to lay like this together every night. Talking. Fucking. Cuddling.

Caring.

It takes serious effort to perish the beautiful fantasy.

Notes for the Chapter:

That was a super fun write! ;)

I really would love to read your thoughts! Share in the comments here or on my tumblr .Thanks for all your support thus far! 🍷💋

16. wild horses

Monday, Patricia goes to work. Has an unexplainably queasy feeling all morning. A dread that builds and builds. Follows and trails her as she takes her usual morning route, hot sun boring into her pant-suit as if in warning.

Sure enough, only a minute after sitting down at her desk, she gets called into Mr. Jones's office.

"Patricia, sit down, please." Mr. Jones motions towards the seat in front of his mahogany desk. "We need to have a little chat."

Patricia knows exactly what this is all about as soon as the words leave his mouth. Doesn't say anything, just complies. Slowly lowers into the rigid chair, throat now closing up.

"First off-" He leans back in his seat, fingertips touching in a steeple. "I want you to know that you're my favourite employee. And that I will do whatever it takes to keep you here."

Patricia nods, lips pressed with shame. Can't speak. Gaze flicking to the ceiling to keep from crying, eyelids rapidly blinking. Her increasing sensitivity these days seems chronic. Won't let her catch a break, keep face when she needs it most.

"Janice saw you working after hours, printing a massive amount of copies of some strange magazine," he discloses sharply. "Now this is mis-use of company time, resources, and literally stealing money out of my pocket. Not something I ever expected from you."

Janice. Of course it was fucking Janice. In a way Patricia's surprised it didn't happen sooner.

"Sir," she starts struggling, "I'm so sorry. You see- I um- have this project on the side I'm working on...I'll..." she flounders, "pay you back, whatever you need-"

"Doesn't matter why." Her boss raises his hand to quell the weak speech. "The owner of McAllister magazine told me to fire you

today.”

That’s when tears finally run over, humiliation streaming in sleek, shiny lines. “I’m so, so sorry...” The right words don’t seem to come out. Being so in the wrong knots her tongue, never caught in a lie this deep before.

“I’ll tell you what.” He gets up, rounds his desk to stand in front of her. A sinister look creeps behind his expression. Leering. She can nearly see the horns sprout from his gleaming, wrinkled head. “I could help you out of this mess, if you provide me with a simple pleasure.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Why don’t you let me take you out for dinner?”

All her muscles go stiff. “Dinner?”

He sits on the edge of the desk, reaches to take Patricia’s hand in his. Her usual headstrong nature now paralyzed by how shockingly wrong this is. “You’re a very beautiful woman, Patricia.”

“Sir, I don’t think-”

“I know I have a few years on you, but trust me. You’ll see the benefit of experience soon enough.” He plants her palm on the hard little bulge in his trousers.

“Oh my god!” Patricia snatches her hand away to burst out her seat, chair skidding across the hardwood. “What the hell!”

“Don’t worry, dear.” A yellow smile attempts to tame her. “I’m very discreet about company relations.” His voice lowers to a gentle, almost delicate tone. “You wouldn’t be the first.”

“This is *harrassment*. ” She backs away, then bores her eyes into Mr. Jones’s beady gaze. Realizes she’s not afraid. That she has another, far superior job lined up and waiting. “You know what? You’re not firing me! I quit!”

Mr. Jones flinches at her increasingly loud tone, stepping towards her

with that soothing timbre designed to calm. “Now don’t make a fuss-“

“I will fucking *scream* !” She tears open the office door and bellows, “Mr. Jones is a big fucking pervert and he just sexually harassed me in here!”

The entire workplace stops to stare. Fingers poised over keyboards. Coffee cups hovering by slack-jawed mouths. Wide-eyed and painfully quiet..

“Just thought everyone should know.” Patricia’s voice lowers sheepishly until she catches Janice gawking, who quickly averts her gaze. She rises back to a yell. “Yeah, Janice, you too!” She whips across the office to her cubicle, and Mr. Jones follows like a wraith.

“Patricia, this is not professional!” he hisses, lunging for her hand as if to drag her back to his office lair.

Patricia dodges, squirms away. “Yeah, and neither is making me touch your gross pencil-dick! Fuck you!” She flips him the bird inches from his nose, then barrels towards her desk. Begins gathering her stuff, grateful she never kept much here.

Mr. Jones hovers close, red-faced and sweaty as she hauls her purse over her shoulder. “You will *not* be getting a letter of recommendation from me!”

“I don’t want your stupid letter!” She untacks a picture of Auntie Doris off the cubicle wall, shoves it in her bag. Turns to him to seethe, pointing in his face. “You are a disgusting, manipulative creep and I’m ashamed of myself for putting up with your predatory shit for so long!” She glances around to see people still staring, aghast. “Yes, you heard it here, folks, Mr. Jones likes to harass his staff and proposition them for sex!”

More pin-drop silence.

“Do with that what you will, people. Thanks for your support. It’s been a real trip.” She exits through the back door, ready to fall apart with either tears or laughter.

She makes her way down the building's front steps, feeling like a giant weight has lifted. The sky looks bluer. People on the street look happier. Everything shimmers and glows with life like she's seeing for the first time. Relief increases with every breath.

She rushes to the nearest payphone. Takes a card out of her purse. Dials with hand-shaking excitement. "Is this Barry Moore? Hi, it's Patricia. Patricia Des Barres. Could we meet up? I want to learn more about this gig."

*

Patricia has a meeting with Barry that same afternoon. He takes her out to lunch in one of the fanciest restaurants in Hollywood. A modern and happening place. A restaurant where celebrities and big-shots like to hang and socialize.

He fits right in, so sharp in black, emanating money and power. Small, gold hoops in his ears. Manicured nails. Gold rings. That clean-shaven head only makes him look sleeker.

There's something...lethal about him. Reminds her of a mafia kingpin until he beams that bright, white grin at her. Smooths over any awkwardness with graceful charm, perfect small talk.

To her pleasant surprise, she feels safe with him. Safe enough that when her salad is served it never even occurs to her how she must look putting a fork into her mouth. No nerves. Doesn't think of Ma telling her to sit up straight and take the tiniest bites. No memories of Ma smiling prettily at whatever new boyfriend she had, all-the-while bruising her hand with a tight squeeze under the table. No angry whispers in her ear: *Don't be a pig, Patty. Don't ever ask for seconds, Patty. Gluttony is a sin, Patty-baby, so don't you dare get a taste for it.*

No, she feels a lulling, warm blanket encase her. Secure in Barry's charismatic aura. A spell woven.

He could trap any fly he wanted in that sticky honey.

"You're simply perfect for this job, Patricia." Barry motions over a waiter who pours her a flute of French champagne. Top tier, worth

hundreds. Glittery-gold bubbles froth on her tongue and she savours it. "You're a remarkable woman. How did you ever manage to print out such high quality material?"

Patricia coughs. Amber wine spills down the side of her mouth and she flushes. "Um...I just know some people." She dabs a white cloth napkin at her chin. "Connections through my work."

"Well, however it happened, it's a magnificent job that you're doing." He sips from his own glass, smiles that dashing smile. "Your writing is better than any other L.A music magazine I can think of. You're getting stars to open up, show their hearts. The info you're milking from guys who won't say a word to us regular schlubs is admirable. You've got some sort of magic about you, some natural ability to reel them in."

She holds onto the table to stop herself from swirling away on a cloud of flattery. "I never really thought about it that way. I just love talking to my favourite bands. Love knowing about their lives, their dreams. Maybe they can feel that."

"Well, doesn't hurt that you look like an 80's Bridget Bardot, does it?" A spark of seduction. An ember in coal-black eyes. "That blonde hair with some red lipstick and you're a bombshell, aren't you? Could get any man to tell you all their secrets. You must know it."

Patricia gets a jolt of unease then, pushes it away to revel in the compliment. Dizzy with it. "Well...I guess?" She's always been aware. Told adamantly since childhood that she was stunning. Grew to love and hate the attention, the objectification. Sought it and ran from it. Still does to this day. "I mean, I certainly don't dress down when I talk to them."

"You are going to burn up the screen, Ms. Des Barres. Mark my words. When people flick through the channels and see you, they won't be able to look away."

She wasn't expecting this much focus on her looks. "But...it'll be about the musicians mainly."

"Of course," he promises. "But you are the main attraction. You're a

star, Patricia. Don't you ever forget it." He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. "Now, I know you're going to want to sign this right away. Right here, right now. But I want you to look it over. Think about it some more. Take your time."

Patricia is so relieved at how he's letting her take that time. Feels taken care of. How thoughtful of him. "I mean, I think I already know, but I appreciate that you're so considerate."

"I understand how these things work, Patricia. You've got to think about your current job, your current life. See how it's going to fit into this hectic schedule. This money flowing into your life. New people, new faces, travel even if things go as planned. It's a lot to think about."

Patricia nods, knowing there is no current job. "Yes..."

"You have so much innate talent. Could be a major blessing for us. But—" He places a comforting hand over hers. For some reason this feels perfectly okay. "—take the rest of the week like I initially said. Call me this weekend when you've looked over the contract. Mulled it over. Given it deep thought. This is a major life change and you should consider all your options."

"I will, thank you." She gulps back more liquid gold. Floating like a dream, woozy. Only salad in her belly to cushion the alcohol. Everything is just *sparkling*.

He gives her the warmest smile. "I sincerely hope you join us. Because if it's not us, some other corporation is going to drag you away. Maybe you'll be in the movies. Something glamorous and romantic. Live up to that Bardot pout of yours."

She touches her lips as if to test that claim. "No need to butter me up." A flicker of anxiety at how intimate the praise is getting. She washes it down with more bubbly.

"I'm absolutely serious. America needs a woman like you."

Patricia's never been this coddled by a man this powerful before. Fawned over by a Hollywood heavyweight. She's starting to indulge

in it. Get a big head. He makes it seem all so plausible.

“You think way too highly of me.” she grins. But maybe she always knew she was special, was going to be somebody.

Billy thought so.

Her stomach tightens. She can't help but wonder what her new lover would think of all this. Barry Moore and his copious charm.

“Just highly enough.” Barry hums. “You know who else you could pass for? A young Diana Doris, back when she was a gorgeous screen siren. But let's be real..” He leans to pour her more champagne. Fills it right to the brim. Amber bubbles pop and she feels weightless. Beautiful. “You eclipse her entirely.”

*

Patricia invites Billy over that night. Wants to break the good news.

When he knocks, she opens the door to find him holding a cardboard box under one arm. Leather jacket gleaming under the fluorescent light in the hallway. His other arm behind his back.

“Hi, Billy.” she says cheerfully.

“Hi.” The hand behind him stretches out to offer a bright red rose. Matches his button up shirt tucked into blue jeans.

Gold fireworks explode in her chest. “ *Ohh* .” She takes the flower, warmed to the roots of her hair. Brings it to her nose to smell its sweet fragrance. Somehow a single rose from him feels more intimate than any jewellery from Derek. “Thank you. Where did you get this?”

“I stole it from someone's ground floor garden at my apartment.” he admits with a mischievous grin. “It was creeping through the fence.”

Patricia gives him a dry glance at the theft, though she's touched that he'd snip that for her. She runs her fingers along the smooth green stem, realizes there's no prickle there.

“Figured you didn't need the thorns.” Billy bends to kiss her cheek.

An innocent peck that leaves her melted. He brushes past her and sets the box on the kitchen table.

She shuts the door behind her. Grabs a small glass vase from the cupboard, fills it with cold water and places the beautiful rose inside. Peeks at him opening up cardboard flaps. "What did you bring?"

"Some very necessary supplies." Billy slides a record up, looking at her over his shoulder. "For starters, I wanted to show you some better Stones albums. Make up for that atrocity you made me listen to." She catches the title in the half-lit room. *Sticky Fingers* in chunky, red font. "You have a record player, right?"

"Yup. Buried in my closet somewhere." She sets the vase on the table next to him. Looks deeper in the box. Gasps playfully at what she finds, clutching his arm. "You brought me a *lava lamp*?"

"I thought I'd help you decorate."

Patricia laughs, breaks into a cackle as she pulls out the retro light source. Liquid colour darkly orbiting inside the glass. "Turning my place into a dorm room?"

"Hey, ambience is important."

"Did you bring a joint too?" she teases. "Some Pink Floyd posters? Maybe some Jethro Tull?"

He grins back, eyes dancing. "I fucking should have, shouldn't I?"

"Let's get super seventies, dude." She glides towards her bedroom, lava lamp under her arm. Sets it on her nightstand and begins to search for her record player. Closet doors opening.

"You're happy." Billy leans against her bedroom doorway, album in hand.

"What makes you say that"

"Gotta smile like the sun. Suits you" He takes a moment to tut, pondering aloud. "Wonder what the big occasion is. I'd like to think it's just seeing me but something tells me that's wishful thinking."

Patricia drops on all fours in front of her closet, drags an old record player from the depths. Her mother's. Glances at him with a perky grin. "I quit my job today."

Billy glows bright. "Nice. Well, that explains it." He pushes himself off the door frame, crosses the room to help her. Lowering to knees, offering the Rolling Stones album to her before he begins setting up the wires. "How'd that go?"

"Uh...it was weird." She doesn't go into the horrific details. "But I think I did the right thing."

"I think so too." He rubs her arm to comfort as if he actually knew what hell occurred this morning. "That place was bleeding you dry. Girl like you doesn't need that shit."

"A girl like me?"

"Coolest girl in California," he winks. "Too much sparkle in your step for that deathtrap. Can't shine in a place like that. You're supposed to shine."

"In the stars?" Barry's influence. She's a star now. A pure, white light, millions of miles away.

Trapped in the black sky.

He smooths a blonde strand away from her face. "Anywhere that's wild and free, baby. Somewhere you can't be pinned down." She gets the vision of a monarch butterfly behind glass. Still alive and fluttering under little silver nails. "You're lightning, Trish. Anyone that holds you down is gonna get scorched."

Patricia doesn't see that. "No. You're way more like lightning than me." She's slowly removes the vinyl, half-emerged from its sheath. "You're pretty electrifying to me. "

"Nah, I'm pretty fucking basic." His tone settles harsh on that last word. "But you didn't call your magazine Live Wire for nothin'."

"Basic isn't a word I'd use to describe you at all."

“Good,” he nods. “Wouldn’t want anyone to know the truth.”

That sentence makes her brows crease. A joke maybe, but also a stark confession of mediocrity that doesn’t make any sense. He keeps doing that.

“You’re the most exciting person I’ve ever met. You’re like...the ocean.” She meets clear blue irises at that moment, now taking her in with longing. “When you kiss me, I could drown in you.”

It just spilled out, like a breath.

“Damn, Trish.” Billy smiles, a rare flush in his cheeks. He leans to kiss her, sultry blues glancing before lips meet. Deep, dark, intoxicating. Drowns her right there.

He takes the album from her between kisses, a warm chuckle under his breath like he’s still absorbing her words. “Wanna lie on the floor?” He sets the record on the turntable. Carefully places the needle down in the first groove and vinyl crackles. “Music’s better that way.”

Patricia’s grateful he doesn’t dwell on her mushiness “Okay. I’ll grab some blankets.” She rises to retrieve sheets and pillows as the opening notes of “Brown Sugar” ring out. “Fuck *yeah*, this is gonna be a good one.”

Billy’s at her bedside now, plugging in the lava lamp. Lights go out so only swirling colours of pink and purple are left. Leaves them in that familiar ambient glow. Seems color in the dark is their thing. Their special sanctuary.

Patricia tosses the bedding at Billy and begins to flow her arms and hips in a dance she can't suppress, laughing.

Billy leans back on a pillow to watch, teeth pressing into his lower lip. “You do realize you’re fulfilling a very specific fantasy for me, right?”

Patricia twirls easily, shimmies. “Just having a good time.” She laughs some more, a little embarrassed but also enjoying herself. Not even performing, just dancing to feel the music.

"I like that," he nods to the beat, entranced by her natural rhythm. "Happy Trish makes me happy."

Patricia two-steps over to him, fingers twining through her hair, before she sinks to straddle his waist. "I'm noticing it's not that hard to be happy around you." She leans down to show him just how much with her kiss.

"Same."

She rolls to lay out on the floor beside him, tucking a pillow under her head. Turns on her side to watch him muttering the lyrics, staring at the ceiling, head bobbing with a slight smile on his lips. Something so adorable about it, like he's a teenager alone in his room, absorbed in his favourite band.

Billy glances over when he realizes she's staring. Breaks out in a wide grin. Cute. "What?" She sees the fine lines around his eyes crinkle, and that's cute too.

"Nothing." She gazes some more. Fascinated by him, full of some effervescent awe. Nothing basic there. She frowns at that thought. At all the times he undermined himself, brushed his talents under the rug. She just doesn't get it. "Why do you get so down about yourself sometimes, Billy?"

"Do I do that?" The mood shifts as stark as the music now changing to something low, slow, grimy.

Maybe she shouldn't have just sucked the air out of the room by asking. "Yeah. You do. All that talk about being basic. Comparing yourself to Dave so much. What is that?"

"I dunno." Billy shifts uncomfortably. "Never did that well in school, never went to college. Never felt good at much besides drumming and surfing. My dad-" He pauses like he's not sure if he should say more. "-he always used to put me down. Hit me and say I wasn't worth shit. Guess it sticks sometimes."

Her breath stops at that unexpected confession. "Oh." She regrets asking now. Places a hand over his heart, her own aching in turn.

“I’m sorry.”

Billy shrugs it off. “It’s cool. I don’t have to see him that much anymore.” He keeps his eyes on the ceiling, watching colors bob and float across the stucco. “I used to think he was invincible. So tough. Could crush me with one look. Now whenever I see him, maybe once or twice a year, he seems so much smaller than I remembered.”

She recalls the last time she saw Ma, frail and gaunt and fragile. So different from the vivacious, strong-headed woman she grew up with. “It’s weird when you realize they’re human.”

“He made me feel subhuman.”

That breaks her heart. She nestles into him. “Anyone cruel enough to hit you and say those things...well, that was his own shit, not yours. You didn’t deserve any of that. None of it.” She decides to share a fragment of her own story, rare for her. “My mom made me feel that way. Subhuman.”

A haunted look comes over him. “Did she put you down too?”

“Doesn’t every parent?”

“No.” He shakes his head slowly. “Some people got it good.” The room fills with sorrow then. Deep pain in violet light.

She pulls a mild example, something that she can handle. “When I was a little girl, she used to tell me she wanted to clean the pretty off my face.”

“What? What does that even mean?”

“I dunno. She used to look me in the eye, lick her thumb and rub at my face. Rubbed until it hurt, crying, scolding me. Told me to stop looking so much like her. That it’d only bring me trouble.” It stings to admit. More than she bargained for, choking up at the memory.

“Jeez...” He takes her hand, squeezes her fingers in empathy.

“She was messed up. Had a lot of issues.”

“She shouldn’t have done that to you. That’s not right.”

And she’s only scratching the surface. “Well, not much I can do now. Best not to dwell.”

“I guess.” Teeth worry at his lower lip. “I’ve never told anyone that about my dad before.”

“Not even Dave?”

“No. Dave was raised right. Wouldn’t get it.”

“I never told anyone that story about my mom before either.”

There’s an anxious pause. “I know we’ve both got a lot more stories, Trish, that we’ve barely said anything. But we don’t have to tell them all tonight, do we?” He looks so young now, so vulnerable. His voice cracks and it surprises her. “I just- I want this to be a happy night for you. You were so happy...”

She softens even more. Understands how much the past hurts. Can drag you right back when you reveal it, relive it. “You can tell me as much or as little as you want tonight, okay? No pressure.”

“Okay.” He exhales a long breath and his eyes water, a drop trailing down his cheekbone. “You too.”

Patricia holds him tighter, and they linger there. Silent and knowing. She changes the topic to something more frothy. Hopeful. “I’m going to take the MTV job.”

Billy shifts towards her, brightening, energy shifting to lightness. “What made you decide that?”

“Quitting my desk job.”

His brows pinch together. “Is that the only reason?”

“No,” she says cautiously. Aware of how flimsy that sounds. “I think this will be a good opportunity for me. And if I don’t like it I can always quit.”

He nods, his hand smoothing up and down her arm. "Whatever you do, I'll be there to cheer you on. No matter what." When he says it, she knows he means every word.

They kiss and it moves her, feeds her, thrills her. The plaintive guitar of "Wild Horses" sweetens the air, and she gets chills of pleasure.

"I love this song..." Patricia sighs, letting the euphoric ballad wash over her. Overwhelmed by the delicate chords. By Billy. All this newness with him, this magic, this dancing light. Heart so full it's almost painful.

You know who I am, you know I can't let you slide through my hands...

"Me too." He gets up on an elbow to hover over her. Stares affectionately for a long moment. "You know, back at the Whiskey, when Rosco asked if you were my girl. I played it cool but all I could think was "please say yes."

She smiles. "And I said "for tonight", basically."

"Yeah, you did," he chuckles.

I watched you suffer, a dull aching pain...

Her fingers tangle through his hair. "I should have just said yes."

His face falls with relief, tension leaving shoulders.

"I feel like I can be my real self with you right now," she murmurs. "A lot of the time I feel like I'm playing a part. But not now. Not with you."

He kisses the soft skin of her wrist. "What part do you play?"

No sweeping exits or offstage lines, could make me feel bitter or treat you unkind...

"Whatever part will get me ahead. Protect me. But you *see* me. And it feels like...like you want it all. Like you only want more."

"I do. Haven't seen anything about you I don't want."

Wild horses couldn't drag me away...

She laughs nervously then, breaks her own spell when she realizes how deep they're getting, have already gone. Wants to spread wings and escape. "Why are we so sappy--"

He doesn't let her fly away from him. "I want every part of you, Trish. Every fucking cell."

Wild, wild horses couldn't drag me away...

She can't respond. A part of her drowning, dying, rebirthing. Just holds him and feels it all.

Another chorus passes and she turns to him. Weak, humbled. "Billy, I-" I want you. I need you. I adore you . Words she just can't say. "Can you sleep over?"

He brushes his nose against hers, a gentle smile peeking as if he can read her thoughts. "I'll stay."

She crawls on top of him then. Lets the last notes of the song sink to her bones as he wraps his arms around her. Her ear on his heart. His mouth lowering to her hair to kiss the top of her head.

And there, for a precious moment, she's happy. Truly happy.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks so much for all your comments and support, guys. Keeps me trucking!

Feel free to comment down below or on my tumblr page. 

17. china doll

Notes for the Chapter:

Heads up: this chapter is the equivalent of a backhand to the face. Those of you who sensed angst coming quick were right. Its most definitely the darkest chapter thus far, so be ready!

!!Trigger warnings!!!: child abuse & manipulation(mental, emotional), light mentions of child sexual abuse, light mentions of bulimia/vomit, heroin usage/needles, body shaming, and just overall wrongness/creepiness...

I'd say enjoy! like I usually do but that seems inappropriate for this one so...hang in there!

It's too quiet today.

Patricia plays with her second-hand toys in the living room, New York afternoon streaming grey light through shady windows. A cockroach scuttles past. Another resting on the kitchen counter nearby. She's learned to accept them, make friends with the spiders, rats and all sorts of bugs that creep and crawl.

Ma hasn't cleaned in a long time.

She's been in the bathroom a long time too.

"I love you, Ms. Princess. You are my beautiful angel and my sweetheart!" Patricia smushes a teddy bear and a doll together to make them kiss. Squeaks her voice out high-pitched to mimic the girl toy. "I love you too, Mr. Teddy. I love you with all my heart. Let's get married and have a baby! I will love you forever and ever!"

Patricia settles the toys in her little makeshift home for them. A big cardboard box covered in crayon that outlines doors and scribbled windows. A little box inside with cut out rags for a bed. Mr. Teddy towers over Ms. Princess but their size difference can't stop their love.

“...and they lived happily ever after.” Patricia stares empty. The game is done now, and she’s bored again. She glances at the moldy-black ceiling. Needs to pee, but Ma is still in the bathroom.

She gets up and pads over to the bathroom door. Knocks gently, nervous that she’ll get yelled at. “Ma? I have to go pee.”

No answer.

“Ma..” Still no answer. Ma usually isn’t quiet. Usually she’d scream at her to go away. “Ma!”

She slowly opens the door, doesn’t see anyone there and gets confused. “Ma?...”

She notices that the bathtub is full of dirty water. Tiptoes over and sees Ma lying under the surface, eyes closed. Asleep like a baby. Faintly blue and peaceful.

Patricia reaches towards the water, afraid to wake this angelic woman. Her palm hovering.

Then a veiny hand whips out the water to grab her wrist. Ma’s eyes open white and wide and her mouth turns into a gaping black void, sucking her under with her. Falling under water, down into a sooty, wet, black chasm-

“Trish!” A male voice rasps, jolts her awake in the dark. A warm hand on her shoulder, soothing. Distant city lights illuminating a beautiful man hovering over her, blonde hair brushing over her face. “You’re having a nightmare, baby, wake up.”

“Aaron?” she whimpers. Hot tears are running down her chin. She’s covered in sticky salt water, streaming down to her collarbone.

“It’s me, Trish. It’s Billy.” he murmurs. “You’re safe now.”

“Billy...” Her body shudders with a sob, wracking with something deep and congested. An ancient wound that’s rising up, up, up. Could kill her with its power.

“You were screaming,” Billy circles an arm around her, brings her closer. “You okay?”

Patricia begins to nod, but then shakes her head, breaking down again. "No. No, I'm fucking not." She drowns in tears against his bare chest. Ripping apart inside.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay." He presses her into him. Lips brushing over her forehead. "It was just a nightmare. Just a bad dream."

"No...it wasn't just a dream." Patricia pulls away to catch her breath. Wipes at her tears with trembling hands. Cradles her face in them. "Most of it was real." She holds back her sobbing with a hard sniff. Tries to collect herself.

"What happened?" Billy smooths a palm up and down her arm. His touch anchors her to the present. "What did you see?"

She pauses, afraid if she says more, she'll shatter again. "It was a memory." A hollow whisper. "A memory of my mother..."

*

Nov 6, 1970

Patricia hears the sounds of throw-up from outside the bathroom.

The toilet flushes and Ma comes out, lovely in her tiny red dress. Sparkling like a ruby. Perks herself up when she sees Patricia reading belly-down on the tattered carpet.

"How old do you turn today, Patty?" Ma coos. Sits down at her vanity. Make-up and cigarette butts littering the surface. She leans in the mirror to put on another thick layer of mascara.

"Nine!" Patricia beams proudly. "I'm nine years old."

"And how old am I?" Ma gleams at her in the mirror.

"Twenty-five," Patricia lies.

"That's right, Patty. Very good." Ma leans back, makes sure both sides of her eyeliner are even. Pouts her plump mouth and smears on a layer of glistening red gloss. Smacks her lips with a loud pop. Movie star beauty. Almost unreal.

"You look really pretty, Ma," Patricia gazes in admiration.

The air goes thick. Buzzing. She made a mistake again. It's so hard to predict what Ma will get mad about.

"What do you want now, Pat?" Ma's eyes snap at her in the mirror. "You trying to get into trouble again?"

"No, Ma. I-"

"I won't fall for that suck-up bullshit. If you want another toy, you're going to have to wait. I don't have the money right now."

"Sorry..."

"You can't have everything, you know. You can be so selfish sometimes. Greedy, even after I give you all I have."

Patricia stays quiet. Staring at the floor next to Ma's shapely legs. She always says the wrong thing.

Ma bends. Takes Patricia's hand and drags her over to the mirror. Makes her sit on her lap. "Sit up straight." Ma adjusts her shoulders, fingers digging in. "Yes. Straight spine. Eyes ahead. Chest *out* . Like I always say, men love a girl who sticks her tits out."

Patricia glances down at the flat plane of her chest under paisley. "Okay." She keeps her shoulders back.

Ma picks up a boar-bristle brush, encased in blonde hairs. Runs it through Patricia's tangles. "You're a mess. Look at these knots."

Patricia winces at the rough movements, hair getting torn from her head with each motion.

"Aaron's taking us out to dinner tonight. Just for you on your special day." Ma leans to whisper. Patricia smells a strange combination of hairspray, tacky lipstick, vomit. "You've really caught his eye, you know."

"I like Aaron," Patricia says quietly. Afraid to say anything else. Wants Aaron to stay in their lives. The nicest man she's ever met. Tall

and blonde and always smiling. Gives her kind hugs. Plays funny songs on his guitar for her. Reads to her. Plays rock-paper-scissors. Shows her strange music she's never heard before.

"A little too much." Ma brushes harder. "You think I don't see what you're doing?"

Patricia doesn't understand. Gives Ma confused eyes in in the glass.

"Ha, playing the innocent, as usual. I know how you look at him, Patty. Always staring, batting your lashes. You've got a crush on him, don't you?"

"No, Ma." Patricia shakes her head. Feels shame because she does have a crush. Wants to marry a man just like Aaron one day, someone that makes her feel special. "He's just my friend."

"He's in love with you, you know. Wants you. Wants to part your little legs and have at it."

Patricia's belly curls, feels sick. Remembers Harold, Ma's last boyfriend who rode a motorcycle and sometimes touched her down there. Aaron has never done that. "But Ma, he always tells me that you're so beautiful and that he loves you." The honest truth.

"Liar." Her mother laughs haughtily. "You think you can take him away from me?"

"No."

"You're a harlot already, aren't you, honey? Always stealing what's mine. When you're around he won't even touch me."

Patricia knows that's not true. Ma always leaves her bedroom door open at night so she can hear the moaning and pounding. Sometimes it seems like Ma wants her to watch. Wants her to know that Aaron belongs to one woman only.

Ma sniffs, checks her lipstick. "Now. Rules for tonight are, don't eat so goddamn much, okay? You make us both look like disgusting pigs. Begging for a bite. Make us look poor. And what are we?"

Patricia watches a tiny mouse skit across the floor from the corner of her eye. Repeats the same old lines. "We're rich, Ma. Filthy rich."

"Exactly." Ma ruffles a hand through brassy, blonde hair. It used to be paler but she dyes it now. "How do I look?" Cold eyes peer at her expectantly.

Patricia doesn't know how to answer. Scrambles inside until she pulls up something she's sure Ma would like to hear. "Prettier than me."

Ma laughs, seems to enjoy that. Pushes Patricia off her to stand up. "You are such a brown-noser sometimes. Come with me to the bathroom. I need your help again, okay?" Her voice is light now, silky-warm. Can change from steel to syrup in a heartbeat.

Patricia nods miserably. Watches Ma take a small black case from a drawer in her vanity. Follows after her into the dirty bathroom.

Ma sits on the toilet seat. Her little red dress tight as skin around her body. Long limbs shiny, shimmering. A hand flicking long hair behind her slim shoulder as she breathes a languorous sigh. Lashes fluttering like butterflies. Some legendary creature, like out of Patricia's Greek mythology book. A siren. A nymph. A love goddess.

A part of Patricia wants to worship and praise. Place her head on Ma's lap and tell her how much she loves her, wants to be just like her. Just like Ma.

Then the goddess presses a syringe into her palm.

"Can we wait til Aaron comes home?" Patricia croaks. "He does it better."

"No, he always judges me, the asshole. Like watching him snort his lines is any different." Ma wraps flesh-coloured pantyhose around her own arm, and Patricia gets that same scared feeling. Hates this so, so much. Wants to throw up every time.

"Are you judging your Mama too, Patty?" Ma catches the dread in Patricia's eyes. Tightens the makeshift strap as far as it will go. Makes the skin bulge.

“No, Ma.”

“You think I like doing this?” Ma snarls. Looks suddenly ugly. Patricia can see how white the skin is on her face now. How she keeps getting thinner and thinner. Dark circles under her eyes. Scabs on her veiny arms. “Do you think I like putting us both through this? You think it’s my fault?”

Patricia shakes her head, tears welling. “No.”

“You know it’s not my fault. If you look at me like that again, I’ll slap you.”

Patricia lowers her lashes. “Can I hold the pantyhose instead?”

“No. You never hold it tight enough. Now, tap like I showed you.”

Patricia holds the needle up, trying not to cry. Fails as soft cheeks go wet. Flicks the glass until there’s no bubbles, like Ma said.

“Don’t cry, you know I hate it when you cry. Why do you always make me feel like shit?” Ma’s voice shakes because she’s crying now too. “Don’t cry! Don’t you dare fucking cry!”

Patricia presses the needle against Ma’s vein on her exposed arm. Deep purple and ugly.

“No, not that one. It’s all bad now.” Ma snuffles, her tears splattering on Pat’s hand. “Higher up. Yes. There. That’s perfect.”

The needle sinks through skin and Ma sighs in relief. Keeps murmuring wetly, face going swollen and puffy from her lament. “Don’t ever do this, Pat. Don’t ever be like Ma. Ma’s bad, okay? And you’re so good. You’re such a good, good kid. How’d I ever get such a perfect daughter?”

Patricia forces back all feeling. Pulls the syringe out of her mother’s arm and watches tears transform to heavenly bliss. Hard gaze now melting, rolling to the stars above.

“Mama loves you, Patty-baby.” Gray eyes shine like washed out moons. “Gonna get better. Mama’s gonna get better soon, won’t she?”

We'll move back to California in no time. See the sun again." A dreamy hand runs through Patricia's pale locks. "Your hair gets so much lighter in the sun..."

*

Sept 20, 1987

Patricia's first day working for MTV thankfully involves no on-camera interviewing. Today it's just a photoshoot. Promo photographs that will be pasted all over Los Angeles before the show even starts. That concept makes her nervous, but not as much as being filmed interviewing bands.

Her interviews were so private before. Intimate. The idea of everyone watching her process is starting to hit her. Everything is going to change.

It's about what she imagined it would be like when she shows up on-set in the early morning. A little studio set up in a Hollywood loft. White screens and blinding lights. A crew of people, cameras flashing, tables lined with catered food. She can't believe the effort put in for just her. It's just *her*.

A styrofoam cup of bitter black coffee is pushed into her hand. She's guided down the hall to a dressing room where a lithe, stylish man named Dimitri fusses over her. Passes her a tiny red dress to wear. He doesn't leave, so she undresses in front of him, turning away, hunched over. Her half-naked body reflects in a full-length mirror so not much can hide anyways.

Patricia shimmies crimson latex up her legs and over her chest. Feels like being held in a giant fist and squeezed breathless. Her breasts pushed obscenely up and out. Her body squished, pinched and displayed. A voluptuous confection. Mouthwatering.

Ready to be consumed.

"Red is so your color, honey," Dimitri nods in approval.

"I can't breathe." She pulls at the dress and it snaps back, stinging. "Is there a larger size? This is so tight."

He frowns, glances at the slight plush of her stomach. Reaches out to pinch her flesh. “Hmm, a bit snug, isn’t it? You can drop the weight fast though, I’m sure. Not to worry. Just a bit of tummy that needs to go.”

A blaze of pink everywhere. Humiliated. She knows she’s gained weight since she started dating Billy. They’ve gotten so relaxed together, she’s letting herself eat in front of him now. A lot. “I guess I’ve let myself go a bit.”

“Just don’t lose *too* much,” he warns. “Don’t want to get rid of what got you the job now, do we?”

Patricia swallows. Hurt and confusion competing with a perverse gratitude that her body is considered desirable by MTV standards. “I guess not...”

Then she’s powdered, painted, glossed. Honey hair teased and skin greased to shine. Red lips. Red dress. Red background behind her. She comes alive in a sea of blood. Light and skin. Flashes illuminating her like shooting stars. Like lightning. Spots and orbs behind her eyelids with every blink.

The photographer schmoozes at her posing. A faceless entity behind a large camera. “Yes! Yes! Yes! You’ve got it, sugar, that’s the stuff.”

She starts out prim on a hard-backed chair, legs crossed. Her poses growing more suggestive with every shot. The photographer’s directions gradually shifting her until she’s on hands and knees. Offering her body. Submitting. Prostrate and worshipping the lens. Doesn’t know how she got here. Her spirit hovering outside herself like a phantom. This pouting stranger. This crawling vixen. This compressed and oiled flesh.

Can’t breathe.

“Yes!” the camera man salivates, “Chest out! Arch your back! You’re a man-eater! Give it to me! That’s it!”

Can’t breathe.

“You eat men for breakfast! You’re a siren, baby! Give it to me! Yes!”

She watches herself writhe from a mile away. Floating, observing her shiny limbs, her lush cleavage, her knees raw from the unforgiving floor.

The photoshoot ends for a twenty minute break. A white robe is draped around her shoulders and she's empty. Exhausted from something she can't pinpoint. All used up.

Later, Barry comes to her dressing room, debonair in classic black. A smile that slices. He approaches where she's seated, gazing at herself in the mirror, something fragile in her expression. Vacant eyes. A beautiful china doll. Nothing inside.

"Patricia, you look absolutely stunning." He leans to give her cheek a polite air-kiss. An uncomfortable static between them she's never noticed before. "I saw you out there, poetry in motion."

"Thanks," she says blankly. Doesn't know how to act. "That was intense though. I wasn't expecting--"

"Oh, that's just the business side of things." Barry sits down in a chair beside her. "We've got to reel the viewers in, don't we? Things will relax a bit once the show actually starts." He gets a concerned look. "Was that too much for you? Should I tell the photographer to tone things down?"

She breathes out a sigh, relieved he could see her discomfort. "No, I suppose that's fine. I'm just not used to being..."

"Sexy?" His dark brow arches. "You must know you're very sexy, Patricia. Are you not aware?"

Patricia feels pinned by that question. Trapped. Wings restrained, trembling.

"I'm aware," she laughs. A nervous titter. Realizes she's never actually admitted that out loud. Can't tell whether it's empowering or shameful. A shade of both. "And I'm not naive. I know being on television, there's going to be more focus on how I present myself."

"Then what's the problem? Is it the dress? Would you like a different dress? We could raise the neck a bit."

She shrugs. "I mean, It's not like I haven't worn anything like this before. I like to show some skin. It's just...all the posing, being told what to do. It's different when someone tells you what to do."

"Oh, don't worry, Patricia." Barry smiles sweetly. "I'm sure you'll get used to it." He reaches in his jacket to offer her a Camel Light. "Cigarette?"

*

One week later, Patricia walks down Sunset Boulevard on a lazy afternoon. A brown paper bag of groceries under one arm. Contemplating which car she's going to buy with her first paycheck. Whether she should move into a new apartment. Maybe put a down payment on a house-

Then she looks up.

Her jaw drops. So do her groceries. A jar of raspberry jam shatters on pavement, splatters like gore at her heels. A bloodbath on the sidewalk.

There she is, painting the sky red. Her body smeared over a giant billboard. Her flesh glowing. Eyes lit up with fire. All breasts and legs and hips. A blue-eyed siren. A beckoning seductress.

At first she thought it was Ma.

Patricia reads the slogan underneath herself in gold font: *Patricia Des Barres will rock your world.* A tiny MTV logo adorning the corner, an afterthought. Dwarfed by her luscious limbs, her flowing golden hair.

Those same limbs shake now as she walks in a daze. Seize up when she sees herself again, and again, and again. Pasted over buildings, glass windows, telephone poles. More sinful poses, more slogans. *Patricia Des Barres knows what's hot. Patricia Des Barres is a real live wire. Patricia Des Barres loves metal. Patricia Des Barres, Patricia Des Barres, Patricia Des Barres.* She's all down the street, her face repeating, warping, twisting.

Then she's running, running away from herself, rushing back to her apartment. Chased by visions of Patricia Des Barres. A woman

separate from herself. A shadow, a scarlet shade of her identity now enlarged, expanded, blown up. Her paper twin, her vixen doppelgänger haunting her all the way home.

She bolts up her apartment stairs, nearly falling twice. Rounds the corner at her floor and then stops.

A bouquet of red roses lies on the carpet outside her door. Wrapped in burgundy cellophane. Petals so dark they're almost black.

Her gut coils, twists. She doesn't touch the flowers, something in her screaming danger. Steps over them as she opens the door, and sees an envelope on the hardwood. Heart pounding as she bends to pick it up.

All her muscles melt to liquid when she opens it.

There's a ticket inside for Cat's Eye's next show. A note attached that says: *See you there, beautiful -Billy*

Patricia picks up the roses. Smells the sickly sweet fragrance, something in her still off. Still reeling. She calls Billy right then, desperate to hear his voice. Stomach flipping again at the thought of him seeing her bronzed body in the sky.

"Billy? Hey, it's me." She twines the cord anxiously around her fingers. Bouquet held in one arm.

"Well, well, if it isn't the most gorgeous girl in the world," he purrs. Honey and golden fire. "Did you get my message? Called you earlier."

"No," she smiles at his warmth. "I just got home. Just found the ticket though. Thanks for that."

"Of course, princess." A dreamy murmur, smooth and low. "I saw your billboard today."

She gulps, mouth dust-dry. Heart ready to bolt out her chest. "You did?"

"Hard not to, you're everywhere," he chuckles. "Holy shit, you look

hot. Can't believe I get to be the one that goes home with you. Kinda want to brag about you even more now."

Her tongue feels paralyzed. Bone and muscle freezing on her. Doesn't want to say how strange she feels. How that woman up there isn't her. Slipped into some alien twilight zone. "Everything's happening so fast."

"Yeah, it's a lot, I bet. But you look great. Super excited to watch your show."

"Do you think..." she swallows. "Do you think it's too much? The way I look, all...shiny." She wants to say *exposed* .

A beat of silence. "Hard to say. It's MTV. I figured they'd glam you up a bit." He pauses. "Do *you* think it's too much?"

"No." She doesn't want to seem ungrateful, prudish. "No, it's just more than I expected." She doesn't know what else to say except, "Thanks for the roses."

"Roses?" A question that lands like glass on cement. "Like, more than one?"

She slowly glances at the dark flowers in her hand. "You put a bouquet of them on my doorstep, didn't you?"

"No. Now I wish I did though. Secret admirer?"

Patricia's hand drops, roses now facing downwards. She hears something fall with a clink. Glances below and her heart stops.

A doll head, rolling across the floor. Eyes fluttering open and closed.

"Hey, you still there?"

She drops to her knees, lungs struggling for air. Carefully picks up the small, rounded porcelain, turning it in her shaky fingers. Pale china face. Blonde hair. Red lips. "Yes..."

"Did it come with a name?"

Inside the hollow head there's a piece of folded paper. She removes and opens it, sees the message scrawled in red marker. *Congratulations, doll.*

"No." She's floating above herself again. Not here. Not here.

"Huh." Billy clicks his tongue. "Weird. Anyways, you still want to come to practice sometime next week?"

She nods vacantly. "Uh-huh."

"Great." A big sigh. "Well, I'm really happy for you, baby. Dream-come-true kinda day, right?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna go now."

"You okay?" A voice like a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm just tired." Down to her soul. "Probably going to go to bed early."

Billy's careful tone continues. "I was actually wondering if you wanted me to sleep over again tonight. Keep you company." The second time he's offered since her nightmare.

"It's alright. I haven't had another bad dream."

"Okay, I just...hate thinking about you waking up all scared again. Thought maybe you'd rather have someone there."

"I'm fine," she says it so tensely. Doesn't want to talk to or see anybody. Only wants to open her fridge and binge everything away. Purge. Go numb. "Don't worry about me. You don't need to care so much, you know."

"Of course I fucking care, Trish," he says softly, a tinge of hurt there. A murky atmosphere forming between them. Darkening, going ink-black, until she can't see his face in her mind anymore. "Alright, we'll talk soon. Sweet dreams, baby. Congrats."

Patricia hangs up. Squeezes the cellophane bundle in her fingers with both hands. Staring at the silky, black-red petals. Squeezes hard

around the dark green stems until flesh pricks and stings. She lifts her hand and sees tiny droplets of blood. Stares at the crimson dots, pooling, oozing.

She had forgotten.

Turns out roses do have thorns.

Notes for the Chapter:

Whew, that one was hard to write. Things are going to get more volatile and dark next few chapters too, so buckle up.

Would love to read your thoughts on this one. Feel free to comment down below or on my tumblr ♥

18. orchid

Notes for the Chapter:

Halloween is coming early with this chapter, kids! Another disturbing one. Another very emotional write for me. Peak angst and not to mention the longest chapter I've ever written. I'm a bit nervous to post this tbh!

Trigger warnings: horror elements, mentions of bulimia/vomit, dark erotica scene(bondage, sensory deprivation, feeding kink), eerie flashbacks of trauma.

Patricia's arc in these latest chapters is likely gonna be too intense/dark for some but this is where my muse wants me to go so *shrug*. I feel like I've been building up to it for awhile now so hopefully it won't be too shocking. It was never gonna be easy, that's for sure.

Just remember, things will come together in the end, it's just gonna be a bumpy af ride to get there. Sit tight.

Here we go! 🍷🌹🌙💧

Patricia purges that night for the first time in years.

She tells herself it will be the last.

Another nightmare soon follows. A Hammer-Horror production. Over-the-top, almost comically terrifying. Plucked from the pages of a gothic novel.

Graveyards. Black roses. Pale dead faces in the dirt. Serpents that curl around granite headstones. A bone-white mansion on a hilltop, lightning striking in the distance. A masquerade ball held there, where a rotting feast is served by candlelight. A bejewelled hand

petting a shivering blue-eyed kitten. A black cobra hissing, poised to strike.

She wakes up in an icy sweat.

The next day she buys orchids from the nearest floral shop. Something to cheer herself up. Vibrant purples that sit by her still-broken window. On the kitchen counter. At her bedside. They do the trick. Brighten her apartment, her spirit. She waters them, humming “Wild Horses” to herself.

Dark red roses lie at the bottom of her trash-can, full of thorns.

*

One sunny day later, Patricia gets handed a script on her first official day of work. An interview at The Doghouse with an up and coming band, Python. All the while compressed into another tiny sleeveless dress that leaves nothing to the imagination, nor air to breathe.

The thing is, she wasn’t aware there was going to even *be* a script.

Barry hovers near the camera man outside. Speaking in low tones, some secret discussion between them. Patricia musters up steel and marches over to him, cue cards between her fingers.

“Uh, Barry. Hi.” Her throat clears roughly. “I’m having some...issues with these questions.”

Barry removes Ray Ban shades to flash a dazzling smile. “What’s the problem?”

She squares her shoulders. “For one, I didn’t realize I wouldn’t be writing them.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Patricia.” He puts up a dismissive hand, gold rings reflecting light to blind her. “This is just for the opening show. The pilot episode. We can’t have anything go wrong on our first episode. We want to have a good foot through the door now, don’t we?”

“I suppose...” She’s already starting to cave. Not part of the plan.

“What issue do you have with the questions?”

“Well...” She shuffles through the deck of cue cards. “Not one of them asks about the music. Just a lot about girls and favourite sexual positions.”

“Really?” Barry peers over her shoulder and she smells dark oudh cologne. Musky-rich and almost too sweet. Remind her of gothic graveyards, heavy black velvet, decaying roses. “What about this one here?” His manicured finger points to a line. “ *What do the lyrics “lick my love-pump” mean?* ” An obvious flicker of amusement in his tone.

Patricia can’t help but snort. “Well, I think it’s pretty obvious what that means.”

He gives her a sympathetic once-over. “Patricia, sweet girl. This is *entertainment* .” Syrupy persuasion envelops her. “We want to *amuse* the audience, *titillate* them. The audience loves this kind of talk.”

She maintains firmness despite the dread of making a bad impression. “I just think me, myself as a viewer would find this kind of...asinine.”

Barry laughs, pats her shoulder. Gold cool against her skin. “You are such a highly intelligent woman, Patricia. Unfortunately, you can’t assume the audience is going to be as smart as you.”

She frowns, disappointed. “I just feel like the questions on the other metal show you just started, Headbanger’s Ball...they ask better questions. That’s why everyone loves that show. It’s authentic.”

Barry takes a moment to smile. Clever eyes darting over her, calculating. “You know, I didn’t actually write these. Let me talk to the script writer. Set things straight. Would you like to add a question? Here.” He hands her a sleek, bottle-green pen. “You can add a few.”

Considerate. Always pulling out an unexpected act of kindness. “Thank you.” She scrawls down her most pressing questions. The ones twirling in her mind before she got here.

“You know I’m on your side, Patricia. A soulful woman like you sees through all the facade, a hardship and blessing in this shallow

world.” He takes the pen back from her. Clicks and returns it to his jacket. “But I must be honest with you. You’re going to have to make some adjustments. Meet us halfway. Loosen your boundaries, if you will.”

“Loosen my boundaries?” The words make her feel fuzzy with apprehension.

“You read the contract, right?”

Fuck. Maybe she shouldn’t have skimmed. She was still woozy with champagne when she signed it. An excited flourish during the cab-ride home after their lunch date. “Yes?”

He nods slowly. Eyes speaking volumes. “Then you of course know that MTV owns and controls pretty much everything that comes out of your mouth. I’m sure you can accept that.”

It sounds so bleak when he puts it that way. “I accept it...”

“Take my advice,” he says. “You need to put old Patricia on the back burner. Bring out new Patricia.”

“ *New Patricia?*”

“Patricia 2.0.” Barry takes a step closer, beams down at her and she feels two feet tall. “She’s the outgoing, sexy, spirited girl that has every man wrapped around her little finger. Isn’t afraid to use her sex appeal to get what she wants. It’s a gift, Patricia. Don’t let those old-fashioned repressive notions of a woman’s sexuality hold you back.”

“Huh...” His little speech sounds so familiar. Sounds like...Ma.

Her lashes lower and she notices his shiny shoes. Black snakeskin.

“Do you think anyone else could get away with asking these questions?” Barry presses. “No, you can because these men trust you, they want to open up to you. You’re so powerful, Patricia. Do you see how special that is? You can sway these men to say whatever you want.”

Patricia imagines a muscled, immortal goddess. Lounging on a golden

throne, shining rays of platinum light from her sceptre. A circle of half-naked men on all fours surrounding. "I don't feel that powerful."

She's faked power. Imagined it. Never actually had it.

"Oh, but you are." Barry checks his watch, more gilded finery. "By the time this interview is over, I'm sure you'll have the whole band on their knees." He reaches into his pocket and slips a cheque in her hand. "Here's a little something upfront. To help keep you motivated."

Patricia sees the digits, eyes widening. "That's more than ten thousand."

"Like I said, Patricia. I'm on your side." He clasps a palm over his heart as if to swear it. "I want what's best for you. You have any issues, you can always talk to me." He takes her arm in his, guides her towards the dark Doghouse entrance, where Python waits for her arrival. "Bear with me as we go through these first few episodes. You'll get far more say as the show progresses. Your power will only increase with time."

"Okay." she nods. Realizes then that she didn't get what she wanted from this conversation. That they met half-way when she wanted full control. Live Wire used to be entirely hers. Now she's taking orders from near-strangers.

But maybe she needs to get used to that. This isn't Live Wire, the magazine. It's Live Wire, the MTV show. Certain sacrifices must be made.

She hates how that thought brings the image of a lamb about to be slaughtered. Held squealing on the altar. The sharp blade hovering.

"Now, Ms. Des Barres." Barry opens the front door. His hand smoothing to her lower back before he slowly pushes her inside the venue. "Go show them what you're made of."

*

Billy comes over to Patricia's place to watch the debut episode of Live Wire, far more excited than she is to see her in action. He sprawls out on her couch. Legs and arms wide, leaving her no choice but to be in

his embrace as she aims the remote at her T.V.

“So stoked to see you onscreen. Have you watched any of it yet?” His hand grabs her stockinged legs to drape them over his thigh. Curled right in.

“Nope.” Patricia pecks his cheek, flicks stations until the MTV logo appears. “I’m oblivious as you are.”

That’s what makes this so terrifying.

Billy cups the back of her head, brings her in for a kiss that softly sizzles. “What was interviewing like?”

“Weird,” she admits with a dizzy grin, dreamy from his mouth. “Strange to have a camera on you when you ask questions. Feels like it changes how people answer. Like, they know they’re being watched and that influences everything.”

Not to mention the fact they’re being asked the stupidest questions on earth.

“Hey, it’s only your first episode. I’m sure it’ll get better.” He retrieves a cigarette from his jean jacket pocket. Lights up and exhales happily. “Things take time, right?”

Patricia plucks the cigarette out of his mouth, inhales a quick drag for escalating nerves. “That’s what they say.”

Then the T.V glows with hot-pink bubble font, an announcement cooing in a female elevator voice: *Up next, L I V E W I R E*. The name bounces at each corner, explodes in a big splat of fluorescent yellow. Drools down the screen like goo.

Patricia can’t keep still, fidgeting. Billy squeezes an arm around her shoulders to soothe.

Then the intro starts and her discomfort skyrockets.

It’s as sinful and blood-red as the posters of her currently lining the streets. Apparently they had been filming her during the promo photoshoot. There she is, on all fours. A submissive minx. Posing.

Pouting. Hair windswept, skin gleaming vaseline. Motley Crüe blasts in the background as the camera licks up and down her body. Peeks down her dress. Not one inch of her escapes the lens. Swallowed whole.

“Woah .” Billy shifts next to her. Looks like he would tug at his shirt collar like a sweaty nerd if he wasn’t so stubbornly cool. “Shit...”

She can’t tell whether that’s an entirely positive tone. His voice doesn’t reveal, but he pulls too hard at his cigarette, ash falling to scald his jeans.

The opening credits end and Billy is still recovering. “Damn, you’re a smoke-show.” He pauses for another heavy drag. “They sure didn’t hold back on those camera angles.”

Then it’s her again. Out on a Sunset Boulevard sidewalk, traffic flowing on the road beside her. Microphone in hand, repeating scripted lines. “Hey, guys. I’m Patricia Des Barres. And here we are on L.A’s happenin’ Sunset Strip.”

Bursting cleavage. Nervous eyes. Hostage smile.

“Let’s have some fun!” She beckons to the camera man, who proceeds to follow behind her. The camera smooths down her back, bottom and legs. Invites the viewer to gawk.

Billy’s far too still next to her, eyes narrowed with intense focus on the screen. Keeps forgetting to tap the excess off his cigarette, ash building precariously at the tip.

“This is so embarrassing,” Patricia finally says. Covering her face, peeking through fingers. Sees herself playing a very specific part: The bubbly blonde bombshell. The cooing vamp. So rigid in her costume.

Billy clears his throat. “Hey, you’re doing great. You look...fucking hot.” He watches on-screen Patricia lean slightly, about to spill out of her black latex minidress. “They wrapped you up real tight, huh?”

“It was a bit of a squeeze.” She doesn’t tell him that she was struggling to move, breathe. That the fabric pinched like restraining bondage. That she was sucking in the *bit of tummy that must go*. That

she purged before this episode to speed up the whole process.

It's funny how loosening her boundaries means being bound tight as physically possible.

Now she's interviewing the lead singer of Python. A bulky, long-haired redhead who's smiling like an idiot at her, struggling to maintain eye contact. Patricia can't blame him. She can't stop staring at her own chest either, considering how the camera keeps zooming in.

"So, Rick." Patricia holds the microphone under his auburn goatee. "Tell me, which city has the hotter chicks, L.A or New York?"

Rick bats see-through lashes. "L.A, babygirl. You know what they say about California Girls."

"I sure do." Patricia gives a strained laugh. "What are your thoughts about the feud between Axl Rose and Vince Neil?"

"There's a feud?" Rick looks like he couldn't care less.

"Yup." She stares vacantly at him, microphone extended.

Patricia remembers this so clearly. She had no idea what to say here. Whether or not she could go off-script.

"No thoughts about it," he answers with a shrug.

An awkward pause.

Then Patricia hears Billy's breath catch when she asks. "Who gets more pussy, you or Damian Woodward, your bassist?"

Rick laughs, blushing before he collects himself. "I'll only answer because you're the one asking, but I can guarantee it's me. It's allllll me, sugar." A flirtatious wink at the end.

Billy turns to her, brows pinched. "Jesus, they let you ask that kinda stuff?"

"Actually, they encourage it," Patricia watches herself ask several

more inane highly-sexed questions. Waits til she introduces the next music video, then mutes the T.V. "So...what do you think?" She winces in anticipation.

Billy seems cautious. Inhales smoke at length, as if hesitant to speak, until he says, "There's no way you're the one that thought up those questions. They don't sound like you at all."

Her heart falls, wounded. Like he just stabbed her. She desperately wanted his approval. "They said they'd only write the ones for the pilot. Just for now, to get our foot in the door." A half-truth. She has no idea how much say she'll have in the future.

He nods, lips pressed together. Like if he opened his mouth all sorts of criticism would fly out.

"You hate it." Patricia says sadly.

"I don't hate it." Billy leans to put out his cigarette. "It just...wasn't what I expected. I thought it'd be more like Headbanger's Ball. This show's so much more..."

"Sexual?" Patricia blurts. "I know. This is what viewers want though, Billy. Titillation." She parrots back Barry's rhetoric. "He actually did let me write a couple of questions though."

"Who did?"

"Barry....the guy responsible for all of this."

"And what's he like?" A question full of suspicion.

"He's very...charming." She thinks of Barry's lethal smoothness. Fingers winking gold and shoes shining black scales. "Very courteous. He says I'll get more say as the episodes go on."

Billy keeps quiet with more vague nods, eyes on the mute screen. So clear that he doesn't want to hurt her feelings any more than he has.

Mortified, Patricia reaches for the remote. "We don't have to watch anymore."

Billy captures her hand in his. "No. We're gonna watch the whole thing." He presses a brief kiss to her knuckles, keeps their fingers twined in his lap. "I'm proud of you, Trish. I'm really proud." He kisses her temple in emphasis.

She's not sure if she believes him. "Thanks..."

They do watch the whole thing and it's an exercise in humiliation. Patricia doesn't know who this empty-headed girl is onscreen. So artificial. Numbingly dull. She can practically see the string dangling behind her. Pulled every minute so she can spout some idiotic question from her painted doll mouth.

"It'll get better," she insists. Unsure if she's talking to Billy or herself. "That's just the first episode."

"It was cool," Billy grunts, stiff with the effort to be nice. Can't fake bubbly blonde as well as she can. "Some parts I really dug. Like the question about funny stories in the studio...liked that a lot."

"That was mine," she smiles in relief. It wasn't *all* a disaster.

"And the way you had that comeback when that one bass player asshole made that dumb blonde joke. I'd like to see more of that kinda shit. *Unscripted* Trish."

Those were all the parts where she didn't feel like a hollow doll. "I liked that too."

"One thing's for sure," Billy muses, "the camera fucking loves you." He gives her a sardonic glance. "Actually, seemed like the camera-man loved you too. Do you think he's a tits or ass kinda guy?"

Her eyes roll. "Billy..."

"Hard to tell," he continues. "Matter of fact, I don't think he could decide either." Obvious resentment in his words.

"Hey, it's MTV. That stuff's just to be expected, right?"

He shakes his head, grimacing. "I dunno, Trish. Do they film the VJ's like that? I've never seen that before."

“Sure they do,” she says weakly. Knows she’s probably wrong.

Billy just shrugs to his ears, as though deciding right then and there to not push it any further.

After a too-long moment he breathes a sigh out his nose. Scans over her, mood shifting with one sweeping glance. The air suddenly humming with something feral, burning awkwardness away with fresh heat. “One thing I know for sure, is that I’m the luckiest guy on earth.” He begins to back her into the couch.

“Are you?” She eagerly wraps her arms and legs around him, glad it’s all over. No more Patricia 2.0. No more watching Billy barely pretend he likes it.

“If you were trying to *titillate* me, I think it worked,” he whispers at the shell of her ear. Hard-on pressing between her spread legs. “Kinda turns me on that sexy MTV babe is all mine. I think I should take advantage of that fact right now, don’t you?”

*

That night, Billy offers Patricia a congratulatory massage. A first for her. No guy’s ever offered before.

He retrieves grapeseed oil from her bathroom, a product she uses sparingly for tight shoulders. Strips her bare. Coaxes her belly-down into the mattress.

Already it’s too sensual for words. Makes her anxious. All this focus on her body lately. Everyone’s looking, wanting, aching for a touch.

“Jesus, you’re fucking tense.” He runs precise fingers down her spine, massages a knot in her lower back. “It’s like you’ve got marbles lodged in you.”

“To be honest, this is...” She groans when he hits a particularly tender spot. Doesn’t like how her eyes water. How she wants to let out inhuman sounds. Getting wet only a minute in. Unusually flustered. “...this is a little weird.”

“Why?”

"I don't know. I guess, I'm all naked and you're all naked, and I'm supposed to just lie here and pretend I'm not turned on." And vulnerable. Oiled up and on display. Again.

"Uh, why would you pretend you're not turned on?" His thumb presses into a cluster of tension. "I sure as hell won't pretend."

"I just feel all exposed." Not just here. Everywhere. Can't hide behind the pages of a zine. Behind ink and words. "And whenever you hit a sensitive spot, it's really intense."

He pauses. "Should I stop?"

"No, it's okay. I'll get over it."

He keeps still behind her. "Well, don't feel like you have to get over it. If you're not enjoying it, then what's the point?"

"I'm fine. We all have to go past our boundaries sometimes, right?"

Billy hesitates. "Alright..."

"Can you turn the light off?" Patricia points to the lamp on her bedside table. "Maybe just leave the lava lamp on?"

"Sure." He leans to switch off the light. The room goes dark and she's hidden for a precious moment. The lava lamp clicks on. Painting her walls, her skin, in neon. Glistening in the dark as Billy caresses oil into her skin.

She tries to let go. Slowly does as muscles loosen, breaths get deeper, ethereal colors gleam. Her thighs can't help but rub together, desire sweltering between her legs. "You're good at this."

"I've got the Midas touch," Billy gloats. "Wanna turn over?"

She does, and it's ten times more intimate now. Billy's feline gaze, watching, heated. His cock hard and twitching as he spreads oil over her breasts. Massages around her sensitive nipples, her upper chest. Caring for the stressed beads of muscle between her ribs. An unbelievable amount of tension stored there.

Her eyes close at the ache of knots releasing. A bewitching kiss follows, the elixir of eros on Billy's tongue. Leaves her writhing. The atmosphere dense with electricity. Red-velvet lust.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs as his hands smooth down her thigh. Her breath goes shallow because she's tender there. Everywhere. Clenched and screaming inside. "Too much?"

"No, I'll breath into it." She exhales slow. Flesh relaxes bit by bit, a delicate sigh from her lips.

He travels down her leg. Surprises her by gently bending her knee towards her chest, her ankle in his hand, thumb pressing into the sole of her foot. Pedicured nails the color of pomegranates come into view, shimmer like jewels.

"Mm, that feels good," she hums in pleasure. Catches the glint in his eye as he brings her foot near his face. "Wait, what are you-" Her soft squeal fills the air when he takes her pointed toe in his mouth. "Oh my god...." His silken tongue runs wet and warm over the pad of flesh as he sucks, lascivious, shameless.

His head lifts up. A knowing grin at the corner of his mouth. "You like that?"

An understatement. She's disintegrating.

"Yes...just...I've been walking around all day, maybe that's-." She gasps, giggles as he continues sucking, unbothered. "God, you *are* a freak."

He kisses the centre of her sole. "Baby, you could walk barefoot down The Strip and I'd still suck your toes."

"That's the most romantic and disgusting thing you've ever said," she laughs. A hand coming up to lightly smack his forearm. "Just don't expect me to do it back."

He smirks at that. "Unfair."

"Life isn't fair." She throws his words back at him. "Thought everyone knew that."

“Touche.” He reaches between her legs with his free hand, thumb circling her clit as he takes her toes in his mouth again.

“ *Mmh*, ” She nearly loses it right there, loosened legs now twitching uncontrollably. Does so only a minute later, too much sensation, too much hunger.

Billy puts her foot down when she’s sated, looking in need of a cold shower. “Fucking hell, you turn me on.”

She gives a languid sigh in return. Watches eyes follow her as she caresses her breasts. Gathers the oil there and smooths it down the hard wall of his chest. Nearly salivating at how he shines. Skin bathed in lantern shades of violet, rose-pink. “Have you thought of doing this for a living?”

“Only if you’d hire me as your personal masseuse.” He moves over her, settles between her legs.

“You’re hired.” She caresses his shaft with subtle fingers. Watches his lips part, eyes go half-lidded.

“Touching me on the job, huh?” he whispers hot in her ear, a toying purr. “This is *harassment*. ”

Desire shatters, her fingers jolting backwards. Her demonic boss leers at her. Sent back to office hellfire. To shame.

“Just kidding...” Billy takes in her sudden retreat, confused.

She lies there, stiff as a board. All his nurturing handiwork undone. “I know.”

“Something wrong?”

“No,” She forces a smile. Doesn’t want to ruin the mood. “I’m fine.”

Another perplexed look, but he’s too turned on to stay worried. He melts into her, their glossy bodies sliding. Tongue and lips meet, tease. Need begins to unfurl in her. Slowly blooming again.

“Hey, I have an idea.” He grinds into her, slippery hardness pressed

against her stomach. "Have you ever seen *9 1/2 Weeks*?"

"I've seen a few scenes on cable," she says breezily, a part of her still jarred. "Pretty risqué."

"Well, there's this kinda hot scene where Alec Baldwin-

"Mickey Rourke."

"Whatever," he grins. Pecks the tip of her nose. " *Mickey Rourke* blindfolds Kim Basinger and feeds her...I think that'd be sexy, don't you?" He buries his face in her neck to gently bite.

She honestly doesn't know what to feel about that. Gets an anxious jump in her stomach. "I guess we could try?"

"Awesome. You know," He glances over her. " you kinda look like Kim Basinger so...this is gonna be super vivid for me."

Apparently she looks like every blonde starlet ever. Any blonde bombshell will do. All interchangeable.

"What should I blindfold you with?" He glances around the room.

She pauses to think. "I've got a black scarf. Top drawer of my dresser."

Billy rolls off her, and Patricia watches his now-oily body cross the room. Neon-soaked. Sculpture in motion. He retrieves a silky, thin scarf. Black and gilded with shimmers of golden and silver thread. Stars, planets sewed into night. Half-light glances off the fabric as he returns to sit on the bed.

"This is pretty." He folds the silk a few times. She notices there's another scarf over his arm, a sparkling navy blue.

"Why did you grab two?"

"I thought maybe I could tie you up?" He cocks a hopeful brow at her.

"Oh." Her heart drops into her stomach.

Billy catches the flicker of resistance. "I mean, only if you want to."

She decides to throw caution to the wind. All part of loosening boundaries. Letting go of inhibitions. Walls tumbling like Jericho.

"I want to." As the words come out she realizes she's not sure.

"Sweet." He lifts the black scarf up, colors swimming over gold designs. "You ready?"

She's still not sure but she says, "Yes."

The cloth wraps around her vision. Lights go out as he knots behind her head.

Patricia inhales intoxicating floral perfume she had once spritzed on the fabric. Violet. Jasmine. A hint of vanilla. Sends her to a soft black dimension where purple orchids bloom, glow under starlight. Taste like bursting-ripe plums.

A warm mouth presses to her lips, sensual tongue caressing hers. Drawing out a shiver. Her wrists are surrounded and in seconds she's restrained. Hands tied in front of her. Bound in silk.

Helpless.

"This is..." She doesn't say *scary*, but it's the first word that comes to mind.

"You good?"

"Yeah," she breathes as slow kisses pepper down her neck. Overtaken by sensation. A wild drumbeat in her chest. An ocean pooling between her legs. "It's so dark."

He tastes the hollow of her throat. "You gonna be okay if I leave you here for a minute?"

"Yes..." She actually has no idea. Everything is so new. Frighteningly erotic. An experiment in darkness, mystery.

Another velvet kiss. The heat of skin as knuckles trail her cheek. "Be

right back.”

Then touch stops and she's alone in the abyss.

She bites nervously at her bottom lip, listening to the sound of heavy footsteps retreating. Creaking floorboards. The squeak of her fridge door opening. Appreciating that he's noisy as he shuffles through her things, cupboard doors practically slamming shut. The sounds keep her connected to this plane.

Then things go quiet and she's slipping. Travelling somewhere haunted, where only the moon shines a light.

Orchids shrivel. Sink into oily tar. Ugly visions spiral, replaying her latest nightmare. Sucked into a moon-lit graveyard, full of bones. Black roses clawing up tombstones.

Then it's her mother's cackle. Sharp fingernails. Vomit on the mouth that smiles sick and mean. *You're a harlot already, aren't you, honey?* Gray eyes roll back in a pretty skull, needle submerged in a purple-blue vein.

“Billy?” she says hoarsely. Throat so dry it's barely above a whisper. Dread so dense she can hardly speak. Swears she can feel the rough grit of carpet that she used to play on with thrift store dolls. The slow crawl of a cockroach up her arm. Spider bites at her ankle.

Always taking what's mine.

She's in her mother's closet. Hiding. Alone and small and near-death with fear. Can hear Ma's delicate hiss. *Where are you, Patty-baby? When I find you, you'll wish you'd never been born.*

The bed sinks beside her.

“Hey, sweetheart.” Her lover's voice. Melted toffee. His body heat enveloping her.

The visions crumble, but fear remains.

“Where did you go?” She aches to reach out and touch him. Frantic that she can't.

“Over the hills and far away.” A soft mouth grazes hers with wicked slowness. Tastes like watermelon. Cherries. Teeth pull at her lower lip, a singe of pleasure at his teasing. “Chopped up sweet things. Stained your cutting board red.”

“I couldn’t hear you,” she croaks, her head pushing up for another kiss that doesn’t come. “Touch me. Please touch me.” If he touches her then she’s still here. Won’t slip back.

His calloused-warm hand sweeps up her stomach, lingers at her breast. Travels gingerly up her throat. His thumb touches over the plush of her bottom lip. Her tongue snakes out to lick. Tastes strawberry, tart and sticky.

“Fuck..” A husky groan from him.

Her breasts get squeezed together. A nipple gets sucked into wet heat. Teeth teasing. Tongue circling. Fire sparks between slick thighs as he rubs her there. A breath later, his mouth is on hers to sample the same berry nectar.

She desperately kisses him back. Gets antsy when he eventually puts away.

“Mm, you’re fucking distracting. Making me so hard I almost forgot it’s time for dessert.” There’s a faint clink of porcelain, bed shifting under her as he moves. “You hungry, baby?”

Her stomach turns but for some reason she’s nodding yes. Something subservient within guiding every motion. A flicker of her past. Afraid to say no.

“If you eat up like a good girl, you get a prize.” Fingers stroke her clit. A shock of pleasure. “Think you’re going to like it. Wanna guess what it is?”

“Billy...” Her body shudders, bliss and repulsion weaving like serpents. The silk around her wrists suddenly far too tight. “I-“

“I’ll give you a hint. “ His voice lowers to offer filth. “I’m gonna fill you up, sweetheart. Make you see stars before I leave a creamy present in you. Give you what you’ve been craving all night. Bet

you're starved for it, aren't you?" A hum of approval, his touch quickening. "How are you this fucking wet? You ready to swallow?"

She's half hysterical. Profound discomfort at his dirty talk. Ecstasy at the tight little circles on her flesh. Paralysis, anxiety humming in this black void.

"Now open that pretty mouth for me. " Two thick fingers curl inside her.

Her lips slowly part. Heart pulsing like a machine gun. Nausea twisting with ecstasy.

Chocolate touches her tongue.

An explosion of memory. A bucket of ice water dunked on her head. Stabbing fear.

She's eight years old again. Sees Ma's wraith-like face. Smells the damp rot of her childhood home. Feel's Ma's cold fingers forcing her jaw shut. Her whole body freezes in panic. Gasping.

"Stop!"

Billy's touch abruptly retreats.

"Stop! Get me out! Please!" She writhes against her bonds, thrashing. "Please!"

Her blindfold is ripped off. Billy's worried face hovering over her as he rushes to untie her wrists. "Hey, what's wrong? You alright?"

She shakes her head violently. Bolts upright and pushes past Billy to the bathroom. Slams the door shut and turns the fan and tap on. Locks the door so she can dissolve into a wail, hunched over the the sink. A heaving wave of anguish that wracks her to the core.

There's a loud knock at her left. "Trish! What just happened? What's wrong?"

She just keeps sobbing. Slides down to her knees to collapse on pale green tile.

“You’re scaring me, baby. ” He raps on the door again, panicked. “Talk to me, tell me what’s going on.”

She curls into a ball against the bathtub. Fear and shame and disgust slamming through her body. Latent memories now beating her like fists.

“Trish!” More knocking, pleading. Door knob rattling. “Don’t shut me out! Whatever I did, I’m sorry. Just talk to me. Please.”

She musters air to speak. Seems to take ages. “You reminded me of someone...” A whimper through her hands, now molded to her face.

“Who? Your ex?”

“No.” She smears the flowing damp from her cheeks. “You reminded me of my mother.”

“Can I come in?” Billy tries again.

She breathes unsteadily, each inhale a scrape against her throat. Lifts to knees to unlock the door. He enters slowly, looking so distraught she feels a spearing pang of guilt.

Billy sits down next to her on the shaggy maroon bathmat, both of them naked and vulnerable. Keeps space between them like he’s afraid to set her off again. “Can I hold you?” The question sounds delicate, cracks his voice.

For some reason that melts her heart, her fear. She nods, leaning into his chest. His strong arms careful around her. Warm compared to the cold tile at her feet. “I’m sorry,” she gulps. “It’s like...I was right back there.”

“Back where?” His hand smooths down her head to comfort.

“Back to when I was a kid and got in trouble,” she snuffles.

“What happened?”

“I guess...I was in a bad head space while you were gone. And then, when you fed me-I just,” she hyperventilates, choking on

words. “Ma...she sometimes force-fed me sweets when I got caught sneaking food. And you turned into her. It was like...like I was this scared little girl again.” Saying the latter sentence makes her ache for that defenseless, loving child. The precious small human who loved so hard and was broken in return. Undeserved. Unfair. Wrong.

She knows this logically. Her therapist from years ago drilled it in her brain yet she still *feels* like she was bad. Disobedient. Should have been better.

“There’s more...” Patricia takes a breath, “I-I had a lot of problems with eating growing up. Used to puke after meals. Bulimia... because of Ma, I think. I always saw her do that. And she always called me a pig when I ate in front of her...starved me. I got better, a lot better. I don’t do it anymore-” She doesn’t tell him that she relapsed a week ago. Afraid if she mentions it, it will solidify into reality. Be yet another problem. She’s been so good for so long. “But food’s just always been a fucking struggle since as long as I can remember.”

Both a weight lifted and a burden added. Only Amy and Auntie Doris knew and she liked it that way. Now he’ll probably think of her differently. Every meal will be watched and worried over. Nothing can be normal now.

Damaged goods. That’s what they call girls like her. Her disorder, her men, her mother. All weighing down until she finally crumbled like ruins tonight.

“Shit...” Billy hugs her so tight she can barely breath. “I’m so fucking sorry, Trish. I didn’t-”

“You didn’t know,” she says shakily. “I should have said something. Stupid of me, to not say anything...”

“I feel like...I pressured you.” Regret splinters every word.

“No, you didn’t,” She lifts off his chest to look at him, eyes gushing over still. “I made it seem like everything was okay. I kept telling myself that everything was fine.”

Billy sweeps tears from her face with gentle fingers. “I could kind of

tell you were tense but, I guess I told myself everything was fine too. *Fuck*,” he looks away to chide himself. “I should have realized something was wrong as soon as you hesitated. You don’t usually hesitate.”

“It’s okay.” She enfolds his neck in her arms, clinging to him. “We didn’t know. It’s okay.”

Even as she says it, she’s not certain that it is. An unbearable feeling. She wants everything to be okay right *now*.

“I dunno...” he sighs. “We need to be more open about this stuff from now on. Like, fuck going past boundaries. If you’re scared, it shouldn’t be happening.”

“It was confusing though, because I was into a lot of it,” she admits. “At the beginning when you were kissing me with the blindfold, I was turned on but then as soon as you left...it went all bad and I couldn’t get back to normal.”

“I shouldn’t have left you there all tied up and blind like that. Thought I’d be gone for just a minute and then I got distracted cutting up fucking fruit.” He chuckles gloomily. “I’m such a fucking idiot.”

“No, you’re not. It’s okay.” She presses a flurry of kisses against his cheek. “Now we know.”

“Yeah,” A heavy breath. “Jesus...I just want you to trust me, and now I feel like I’ve ruined everything.”

She can’t say whether or not trust is there either. It’s all too fresh to know. “Let’s go back. It’s cold here.”

They untwine. Billy takes her hand and guides her back to bed. Turns on the lamp and Patricia sees the bright spread of fruit and candy laid out on china plates. Decorating the sheets with good intentions. Just wanted to have fun but she was too fucked up to play.

Broken. A shattered porcelain doll, limbs all askew. Too mangled to be glued back together. Even when she thought she was fixed, she wasn’t. Some hairline fracture that when touched, breaks the whole

thing apart again.

“You did a real good job,” she laughs sadly.

“I’ll put it away.” He looks so ashamed, tail between his legs. Lashes lowered like a little boy that just got beaten.

“I actually am hungry.” She picks up a chunk of pink watermelon to soothe herself. Or maybe just Billy. Crisp fruit explodes in her mouth. “But no candy, please.”

“It’s gone.” He grabs the plate of sweets and disappears into the kitchen.

Later, after a few pieces of fruit, Patricia lays back in bed, held in Billy’s uncertain embrace. The energy is still dark, horribly tense. Like something grotesque came out and is sitting on her chest. “Um. I’m going to burn sage.”

“Okay...” Billy watches as she turns to her bedside table and lights up a bundle of dried white-green leaves. Hovering it around her body, over Billy’s too. Filling every corner of the room with musky-sharp smoke.

The tension lessens somewhat, that familiar earthy smell comforting. But whatever just got let out of her is still deep-seated. Won’t go away that easy.

“That stuff sort of smells like pot,” Billy says softly.

“I know.” She gives him a weak smile. “Got in a lot of trouble for burning this in my dorm room.”

Patricia gets spooned in his arms again. Kisses trailing down her spine, each one a heartfelt apology. Then they both go quiet, and for hours she’s wide awake. Staring at nothing. Still overcome with something unfathomable, disturbing. A nameless shadow pinned to her.

She prays the feeling won’t last long.

Notes for the Chapter:

big breath out thanks for those still hanging with me. Thanks for all your comments and kudos and kind words. Shoot me a message down here or on my tumblr if you'd like to chat about this one!

Xoxo♥🌹☾

19. soul sacrifice

Summary for the Chapter:

Patricia goes to Billy's band practice. Drama ensues.

Notes for the Chapter:

Another BIG rollercoaster ahead here guys. This was originally going to be over 8000 words but I decided to cut it in half and save the lighter stuff for next chapter.

!trigger warnings!: violent sex and the aftermath of it, possessive behavior, patricia is still on the struggle bus, angsttttt

Hope you...enjoy? lol

Billy doesn't call her the next day. Or the next. Or the next. Unusual after a month of him calling her almost daily.

She knew it. Something was breached the last night they were together, ripped open. Released to the ether and stalking them both. Unbearably potent even miles apart.

She made a fool of herself. Every stitch split and her guts exposed to the light, once so safe in secret darkness. She's someone else to him now. A burden to bear. The thought of him judging her as too damaged to be with hangs heavy, manifests as a physical ache in her chest. When a week passes without hearing from him, she lays spread-eagled on the living room floor. Ashamed and dismissed.

She refuses to call him.

To her relief, Billy doesn't cancel their date that weekend. He picks Patricia up as planned, to take her to Cat's Eye's band practice.

It's an evening cool and brisk. For her, laced with anguish. The tension between them still present as she enters the vehicle, as she lightly kisses his cheek. An energy dank gray and oozing. Wheels take

off towards Santa Monica just as rain meets asphalt, filling night air with the smell of salt and bitter green.

Billy's detached tonight. Smoking and hiding behind rock music blasting from car speakers, behind monosyllabic sentences. A stream of white billowing around his profile as she takes him in through small, sip-like glances. Clouding cream between them. A barrier.

Rain beats down on the pane next to her. Droplets shimmering. The passenger window looking penetrable, malleable, like she could reach right through it. She catches something scarlet in the distance. A blur at first. Her palm smears fog off glass and she sees herself crystallize. The her that's not her, spread across the side of a bus a few lanes away. She stares into her own faded eyes. Water sluicing down paper-blue irises like tears, until drops pepper thick and she becomes a watercolor haze.

The bus disappears around a dark corner. Her breath returns in a small gasp, unaware until then she's held it painfully in her lungs.

"And up next," the radio announcer purrs, "*Soul Sacrifice*."

Her hand jolts forward to switch stations. A rich feminine voice now crooning *I live among the creatures of the night, I haven't got the will to try and fight against a new tomorrow*.

"Not a Santana fan?" Billy mutters. The closest they've come to conversation the whole drive.

"Nope." In reality, she doesn't know why she changed it, but the song name struck her like a bullet.

"Real shame. Badass drums in that one."

She quirks a soft smile at him. "Yeah, if you count bongos as badass."

"Hell yeah, they are." Billy grins back at her, like light slanting through gloomy cloud. An opening back to her. "I should make you listen to my African Percussion tape. Show you the wonders of hand-drumming."

"I'd rather just listen to you play." It comes out more cold than she

wanted.

They drift back into silence. Get swallowed up by the wordless void again.

The Camaro parks. Car doors slam shut and they cross the small parking lot. No light except the L.A skyline and the abandoned building emanating rainbow glow through its windows. Dave's swirling guitar and Rosco's travelling baseline already fills the air. They approach the music, but before she can open the door, Billy takes her hand and pulls her into his arms for a spine-tingling kiss.

After the shroud of evasiveness, want explodes in her like a million fireworks, shattering any lingering haze. She's slowly backed into the wall of graffitied brick. The sound of rain pattering on leather, on concrete and metal. Smoke on his tongue. Saccharine tang of cherry gloss. The scrape of denim between bare legs as his thigh presses hers apart.

Patricia takes plain passion and feeds on it. Consumes and recycles desire into a need so intense it feels like dying, overpowering them both. She breaks the kiss to whisper in his ear, soft cheek nuzzling his stubble, an aching constriction in her throat. "Why didn't you call?"

Billy pulls back to stare for a beat, golden waves now touched with jewel-like droplets. "Felt like maybe you wouldn't want to hear from me, you know, after..." He glances away, face taut. Voice clenched with what can only be regret. "...and you didn't call either."

"I'm over it." Her hands slide up his shoulders, his neck. Run through tresses to cup his head as she trails his throat with needy, wet kisses. "See?"

He digs his arms behind her, molding her into him even further. "I missed you too."

She never said it first, but she needed to hear it.

Kisses grow sharper and sweeter all at once. Whisper-light one moment, ravenous the next. Tenderness and violence. Cherry and smoke. Her hand flirts over denim to feel his hard length. Squeezes

slightly. A soft rasp of a groan fills her mouth.

Billy pulls back, hot and reluctant. "Baby, I'd love to do this right now but-*fuck*" His breath shortens at her persistent touch. "-I'm already an hour late."

"So?" Seductive fingers play him as precise and intense as the electric guitar that glitters the night. "Be an hour and ten minutes late."

Soft, slick lips slide over hers. Capture her mouth for another thorough taste, matching her hunger. "You want it that bad, huh?"

She answers by unbuttoning his jeans.

"You know I'll give it to you later. Just wait- *mmm* fucking hell," His voice burns gruff against her ear as she maneuvers his hand to her breast. Masculine fingers travel under the fabric, cup and caress instinctively. "I'll fuck you in the car right after. How about that?"

"No." A frantic shake of her head, overwhelming him with more kisses. "Now. I need you now." Their lips brush together, warm and wet from honeyed tongues and falling rain. Not enough. Nowhere near enough. She rakes at his shoulder blades, ready to claw him open. "I can't feel you, Billy."

The moment falters. Their faces ghosting, hovering in the dark.

Billy licks his lips, a careful tone on his breath. "I'm right here, Trish."

Just then the door next to them opens. Rosco's small figure slants into dim light. "Hey, it's blondie and blondie!" Billy's hand flits away from her breast as the bass player glares a hole through him. "What's with the loiterin', you tardy fuckin' bastard? No hanky panky until you've banged the gong or triangle or whatever the fuck you play. I gotta be some place."

Billy offers a brash smirk. "Be right there, *Fonz*."

"There's about a million dumb blonde jokes forming in my mind right now." Rosco glances at Patricia. "Not you, I'm sure you have enough brains for the both of you. God knows he needs the help." He gives

an agitated sigh as he returns inside, voice echoing loud. "Dave! Pretty Boy's been right outside feeling up his girlfriend's ta-ta's this whole fuckin' time!"

Billy grins at Rosco's scolding departure before he kisses her forehead to promise, "After."

Patricia forces back the desperation that wants to burst out and maul. "I guess watching you play is a form of foreplay." Billy backs away from her but she grabs his hand, slips it under her skirt. Makes him stroke the overflow of slick between her legs. "Though I don't think I need much more.'

Billy does something between a groan and a chuckle as his fingers explore. "You are *bad*, baby." It takes obvious effort to pull himself away. He zips up, opens the door for her, a gentleman before he grabs her ass on the way in.

Despite their lateness, Rosco and Dave seem happy to see her. Chugging back beer and congratulating her on the new show. She knew she was in good books already but being on T.V seems to give her extra love. She's not sure how to feel about that. This new feeling of celebrity.

Of power.

Nick isn't here yet but Patricia wouldn't expect anything less. If anything, she's grateful. Hates to watch the animosity between the two lions. One pale and sinister, the other made from deep golden fire. Twisting around each other, nipping tails, waiting for a moment to strike.

Their practice is just as enjoyable as their shows. The jokes they crack in-between songs. The banter. Makes it feel more raw. Real. She seats herself on the couch and watches awe-struck from the sidelines. Privy to something special and intimate, sipping on cheap beer provided, the atmosphere magical with all the multicoloured lights reflecting off gear. Dave's guitar lights up like a kaleidoscope as if he's playing a living entity.

The place heats up as musical frenzy goes wild. Billy shedding

leather, skin shining sweat under his white muscle shirt. Shooting her affectionate glances that sometimes slip into a teasing grin. No doubt between them that they'll get their fill of each other tonight.

She's alive again. The past forgotten for now. No MTV job on her mind. No ethereal body that doesn't belong to her. Just here with melody, laughs, and-

The door opens.

Nick walks through, followed by Derek, dripping rainwater.

Billy stops drumming.

It all happens so quickly, at atomic intensity. A blur of blonde and skin across the floor. Derek's frail body smashing into the brick. The violent grunt of air as breath escapes lungs.

"Billy, don't!" Patricia drops her beer as she jolts to her feet, amber bubbles spilling across cement.

"You sick fucking piece of shit," Billy's fists tighten on Derek's leather lapels. The grate in his voice terrifying. Promising pain. "Fucking psycho."

"Hey, get the hell off of him." Nick pushes Billy's shoulder. A mistake. Derek's weak enough that Billy has no problem overpowering him one-handed. Nick gets shoved back hard, collapsing on his ass, limbs akimbo, too high to function.

"I knew you wouldn't stay away, you sick fuck." Billy sneers. The answering shock in Derek's eyes looks real, as if he didn't expect to see either of them here. Though he was always a good actor. "Hoped I'd see you again. Been itchin' to snap you in half."

"Billy, let him go." Patricia slaps her hands on Billy's bare arm, pulls him back with a fierce strength that startles even her. His body losing balance, a step taken backwards.

Billy barely glances at her, breathing hard through flared nostrils. Glaring at Derek with a gaze that thirsts for blood. He ignores her plea, jerks his arm out her grasp. "Psycho fucking followed you here."

He slams Dereks' body against the wall again for emphasis, a sharp thud as skull hits brick.

Derek coughs, thoroughly winded. Eyes closed like his head is swimming. But then an eerie laugh emerges, a manic grin on lips stretched wide over sharp teeth. Lids snapping open. Pupils shot. "So *this* is the guy, Pat? Didn't think you'd lower yourself that much, doll. Love your show by the way. Never looked better."

A dangerous silence that lasts mere seconds, feels like eons. Billy's eyes flare electric blue. Mouth parted like he can't believe the audacity.

Before the inevitable punch gets thrown, Patricia yanks on his arm with all her power. "Stop."

Billy heaves his gaze towards her, fuming. "Are you fucking serious?"

A ferocious tone whips out, her eyes just as stormy as his. Nails digging into skin. "Just. *Don't*."

An unbearable pause, no air to breathe, sucked up by Billy's fury.

He lets go. Stands there in her grasp, chest heaving like a bull ready to charge. Eyes tearing through Derek as he snarls, "Get the fuck out."

Derek snorts back, pushes off the wall to take a good look at Patricia. A pang of dark energy between them as they absorb each other.

For once, she can't form the words to speak to him. A deep well of pity in her at the sight of his emaciated body. Clothes sagging and skin sallow. Quickly followed by fear at the impossibly aloof look in his eyes. Unnaturally calm.

Derek peels his gaze away. Gives Nick a wry glance, who's still on the ground. "See you next weekend, ol' pal." He leaves through the backdoor, offers a backwards glance at her to flash an unwarranted smile.

In that moment she knows he won.

Every muscle in Billy's body looks strained, murderous eyes staring out the door Derek left open. The room eerily quiet besides the buzzing of amps and Nick's boots squeaking as he stumbles to his feet.

"Way to scare off the guy who deals the best China White in L.A, dickhead," Nick mutters. He barely gets the words out before he's shoved into the wall too.

"What the hell is your problem, man?" Nick squirms under Billy's grip. Fear in his bleary eyes, likely very aware that he's far too doped up to fight.

Billy gets in his face, close and menacing. "What's *my* problem? That psycho freak terrorized my girlfriend and you're bringing him around like he's some fucking buddy of yours?"

Nick glances at Patricia. "He said they dated, I didn't know..."

"Yeah, well you better learn fast, asshole." Billy seethes. "If I ever see him around here again, I'll knock your fucking teeth out."

"Alright guys, break it up." Dave comes between the lions, attempts to gently push them apart. A brave move considering his slim frame, though Billy's hands won't untwine from Nick's shirt. "Seriously. Cool it down."

Rosco continues to hover on the sidelines, smart enough to not get involved, looking ready to inch out the door and escape to one of his other, less-disastrous bands. Billy still doesn't budge.

"Billy, c'mon." Dave presses.

He releases Nick with a shove, barely keeping a lid on the rage. He pushes past Patricia and stalks over to the drum kit. Retrieves his leather jacket off an amp and storms out without another word. Door slamming brutally.

Patricia grabs her purse off the couch and rushes after him. Mist greets her as the door opens into the night. Rain still beating down, low rumbles of thunder in the distance now.

"Billy, wait up!" Heels clip against pavement to catch up to him, now half-way across the shiny-wet parking lot. His broad shoulders taut under gleaming leather. Lights from the building behind them illuminating him in a flood of deep red and blue. "Billy."

He keeps pace as she walks at his side, ignoring her presence.

"Are you mad at me?" She seeks his eyes for recognition.

Billy doesn't spare her a glance. Stops mid-stride to reach in his jacket and light a cigarette, hand cupping against the damp. He exhales a white cloud and continues to walk and fume.

Patricia widens her strides to keep up. Touches his shoulder and he jerks away like she burnt his flesh. "You're mad at me..."

Smoke streams from him as thunderous night builds. A menacing backdrop of sound and static from the coming storm.

"Yeah, Trish. I'm fucking mad at you." Billy stops in his tracks again when he spots Derek's red convertible on the other side of the lot. He points his cigarette towards the shadow in the driver's seat. "Asshole's still fucking here. Great. That's just great." Another sharp inhale before a dark cackle suddenly echoes from his mouth across pavement. Venomous. The fine hairs on Patricia's nape rising in response.

Before he can open the Camaro door, she grabs his hand roughly. "Let's talk."

"Don't wanna talk right now," He yanks his fingers away.

"Well, I do."

Billy finally looks at her. Ocean gazes meet with electric recognition. She goes breathless at his smouldering expression, ashamed at the part of her that feels instantly aroused. White heat crackles between them, answering lightning to the thunder booming in the distance.

He flicks away his cigarette. Pushes her against the Camaro and gives her a searing kiss. Lightning strikes at the corner of her vision, a flash of light in the black sky.

There's no hesitation in her desperate response. She jumps in the fire, pulling him into her, potent need repressed since they got here now flaring back up at full force.

Billy pulls away, no change in his chilling tone. "Get in the backseat," he mutters. A thrill of lust sparks through her at the command. He opens the driver's door. She pushes the seat forward to climb in the back and he follows after. She lays her body down, leather under her slightly wet from the window slivered open.

Billy shrugs off his jacket before he presses his body into Patricia. Kisses her fierce. Wicked. Cold and hot all at once. "Gotta soft spot for Psycho?"

"Just don't want any blood spilled." She moans as he pushes his hard-on between her legs. Tight skirt getting pulled up so he can grind against the wet center of her.

"I do. I want to beat him until that's all that's left." He runs his fingers over the crotch of her panties. Breath going ragged at how soaked she is. Teeth nip her earlobe as he rubs the evidence of her desire. "I'm gonna fuck you so hard you'll forget he was ever inside you."

"Yes, fuck me," she pants. "Fuck me."

Make it all go away.

He unzips. Moves panties aside and fills her up, doesn't let her adjust to him. Just starts rutting. "How did he fuck you? Tell me."

Patricia groans at the harsh stretch. "Greedy. Fast. Finished fast too."

He laps that info up, gloating. "Did he make you come?"

She shakes her head. "Not much."

"Yeah, I know he didn't." He fills her to the brink, pumps her steady. "First time I touched you, I knew the last guy was a bad fuck. You looked too grateful."

She bites his shoulder in response. "Arrogant."

"There she is..." He angles his hips so she's gasping. "I can be arrogant, baby, but at least I know how to fuck. You dream about my tongue and cock all day, I fuck you so good."

"Harder. Can't feel anything." A dig to get under his skin, to rile him up. Make the wolf come out and devour her.

Billy's eyes glint with offense. "Yeah fucking right." He drives into her, and the Camaro rocks, an ecstatic whine bursting from her lips.

"He can hear you, you know," Billy grits through his teeth, "But you want that, don't you? Want him to know who makes you come, whose stroke you can't get enough of. Want him to know who who this pussy belongs to. Aches for."

"Yes, fuck me..."

His lips brush against her ear, voice gruff and hot, almost taunting. "Your pussy aches every time you think of me. Gets sopping wet for me every night, even when I'm not there. Touch yourself but it's never enough, is it? You want him to know that?" Each thrust drives home his point. Pressure from his pubic bone against her clit making her toes curl. "Want him to know how addicted you are? How much you need me inside you?"

"Yeah, I want him to know-oh *god*-" A swift orgasm rocks her, powerful and shockingly deep. She gives a husky moan from her gut, voice echoing through the parking lot. Rain sparkles down glass, reflects rich sapphire and ruby hues to make Billy look painted, godly. An immortal being shifting from exalted lover to ravenous wolf with each flicker of light and shadow. Worshipping and consuming her.

"He never made you come like that, did he?" Billy rakes a possessive hand through her hair, relishing her afterglow. "You only come that hard for me. Say it."

"Only for you..." she says dizzily. Legs trembling, colt-like as continues to rut into her. Swimming with lingering sparks. Body languid and satisfied.

On the surface.

Somehow physical bliss is not enough. Starved for something far beyond pleasure, flesh and form. The skin that keeps them apart. Something that obliterates, burns away memory. Reshapes the past.

“More,” she breathes. “I need more.”

Then lightning strikes. The whole car illuminates with blinding light and something reptilian and cold comes over her. A seeping numbness that rises up limbs. The sensation of drifting over herself. Bodiless. Closing her eyes and seeing her form red and glittering across the side of the bus again. On a flashing television screen. Derek’s face snide and hollowed out as he leers at her. His smile becomes Barry’s, then her mother’s. Then Derek’s again. A montage of dark chimera, sinister shadow.

She pushes the images away. Keeping eyes wide open, looking deep into Billy’s burning gaze already watching her, his own lids heavy with desire. “Harder. I need you. Need to feel you.” Fingers dig through his hair. Tug at the roots then travel up his shirt. Scrape down his back sharp enough to make him hiss. “I need you, Billy. Please...”

“Yeah, beg for me,” Billy rasps as his hips pick up speed, arms linking under her knees so he can thrust deep. “So fucking pretty when you beg.”

Words and motions that would normally send her reeling with lust.

Not enough.

“Harder.” she pleads. Words to simply goad him now very real. Pleasure now a blank void. Unreachable emptiness expanding until she’s floating in lightless abyss again. “I can’t feel you. I can’t.”

His movements sharpen, pistoning into her, knife-like. Threatening to split her apart.

“Harder,” she repeats, words splintering off. She wraps her arms around his neck, pulls him close so his breath fans at her throat. Her eyes watering at the ferocious impact. Still feels numb to it all.

Farther away with every thrust.

“*Harder?*” He’s already pummelling her more brutally than he ever has before. Her head hitting the side of the car. Skin slapping angrily as she claws at his back.

“Hard as you can.” A stinging burn inside. His thrusts barbaric, crushing. Sharp pangs as he bruises her cervix. A whirlwind of pleasure and pain. Feels like he could kill her and it’s still not enough.

His voice shifts to a concerned murmur. “Am I hurting you?”

“Make it hurt,” she whimpers. “Hurt me. Please hurt me.”

He lifts up to look at her, brows creasing. “No.” A firm tone as hips slow their pace. “Not gonna hurt you.”

“Why not?” Her voice cracks, trembles. Hot emotion she can’t name rioting in her. “Everyone else does...”

Billy freezes. Atmosphere going pitch black and foul, like she just told him someone died.

“Don’t stop.” She yanks at his shoulders to urge him on, even as he goes soft inside her. “I’m close.”

“I’m not.” He pulls out, gets off her to sit upright. Elbows on knees as he cups his face in his hands, breathing out slowly. “*Shit.*”

“What’s wrong?” She knows it’s *all* wrong but asks anyway.

“You know how we were talking about boundaries? We just fucking crossed mine.” He swears under his breath as he gets out of the car, slamming the door shut. Standing outside as she crawls between the seats to sit in the passenger chair, a deep embarrassment in her rushing to the surface. Stomach curling shamefully.

Billy lingers in drizzle to light up a cigarette and watch the red convertible still parked on the opposite side of the lot. Trish waits, hands wringing, not sure whether to stay or get out and talk to him. Not sure what she would say if she did.

After he finishes his cigarette, he lights another one and joins her in the car.

“Sorry if I went too far.” Patricia murmurs as he settles next to her.

His jaw clenches as he deftly taps ash out the cracked open window. “Did I really hurt you?”

A stinging ache still twinges between her legs. “Yes.”

“Fuck...” He glances at her with eyes that match the shame in her gut. “I’m sorry, Trish. I-”

“I wanted it though.”

He shakes his head, looks towards indigo-scarlet light still flaring from Cat’s Eye’s practice space. “Maybe you did, but it didn’t feel right to me. Not after what happened last time. Feels like...like I fucked with your head or something. Opened up a door inside you that I shouldn’t have and I feel like shit and I just don’t-”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” She touches his arm, fingers soothing down his skin. “I’m fine.” As she says the words, she knows she’s lying for his sake.

She hurts.

Between her legs. In her head, her heart.

Everything hurts, but at least when he fucked her it was a hurt she could understand. Focus on. Distract from painful memories. Old ones that can’t be wiped away. New ones being formed that she can’t categorize yet, but make her want to scream.

Billy takes her hand, twining fingers with her before glancing at his rearview mirror. “He’s still there, you know. Jesus, I could just-” As if on cue, the red convertible revs its engine and backs out before leaving the parking lot. A slight weight removed. He sighs heavily out his nose. “Why do you keep protecting him?”

A question that makes her want to burst into tears. “I don’t know,” she says numbly.

“Do you still love him?” A pained look forms in Billy’s eyes.

“No, but I loved him once. We shared a lot together. I would never—” she falters. “I never want anyone to get hurt. I still care for his well-being, even though he did some awful things. I mean...I was with him for a year.”

Billy pulls from his cigarette with narrowed eyes, obviously not liking her answer. “From what you tell me, he was playing you the whole damn time.”

“I know. I just...I can’t shut it on and off. I can’t help feeling sorry for him, like I want to help him. Want him to get better.”

“He doesn’t want to help you back, Trish.” He aggressively flicks his cigarette out the window. A movement is so sharp she flinches. “I can guarantee that.”

“You’re still mad at me.”

“No, I’m *frustrated*.” He casts her an exasperated once-over. “I’m frustrated at this whole insane situation. Whatever he wants to do is some sick, twisted shit. This whole thing is getting more and more fucking dark, okay? You think he’s just gonna stop? No, he’s gonna keep upping the ante.”

She knows he has a point. Derek’s actions keep going above and beyond what she ever thought he was capable of. “Can I tell you something, that you promise you won’t get mad about?”

Billy shrugs. “I can’t help what I feel. But I promise I won’t yell at you.”

She inches closer, voice lowering. “He’s the one that left the roses on my doorstep.”

Billy shoots her a wary look that needs no words.

“And inside the cellophane,” As she speaks she realizes exactly how dark this all truly is. “there was a blonde doll-head.”

Billy gives an exasperated scoff like he can’t absorb that. “And you

still want to protect this asshole? This guy should be in a fucking straitjacket.” He goes quiet, jaw muscle popping with tension before he speaks in a low tone. “You lied to me about him again too. You promised you wouldn’t.” Even without yelling, his glowering face still makes her feel overpowered.

“I didn’t lie,” she says quietly. “I just didn’t tell...”

“Why not?”

“I knew you’d freak out about it.”

“This is getting fucking scary, Trish. You should have let me punch him, at least it might have freaked him out.”

“Or maybe just provoke him more.”

Billy snorts. “Right, because you moaning and groaning at the top of your lungs while I fuck the shit out of you yards away from him isn’t gonna provoke him at all.”

“You started it,” she says. Aware how much she sounds like a silly child now.

“Yeah, I did,” he snaps under his breath, “I didn’t know whether I wanted to beat him to death or fuck you to death, so I went with what you’d let me do.”

“What if you tried to hurt him and he had a gun?”

He stares at her for a long moment. “Trish. Listen to what you’re saying. He left some freaky doll-head on your doorstep to fuck with you and you think he’s capable of shooting me. This is serious shit. This isn’t something you brush off.”

A fluttering dread in every muscle. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Look.” He shifts to gently cup her face with both hands. She pushes into his palm on instinct, feels hard callous against her cheek as she takes in his insistent words. “If you’re not going to let me touch him, at least talk to the cops again. You can’t just ignore this and pretend it’s not happening. He sure as hell isn’t going to let you.”

"I just don't know if they'll do much."

"At least *try*."

"Okay," she nods reluctantly.

"I think maybe you should stay at my place tonight," he says softly. His thumb smooths across her cheek, lingers at her bottom lip. "Actually, maybe you should stay with me until you know he's not stalking you anymore. Move in for a bit."

That startles.

"Why?" She grips his wrists, pulls her head from his grasp. An instant jolt of anxiety at the suggestion. Thrown into a pressure cooker.

"Don't play dumb, Trish."

"I'm not. That just seems like overkill." The previous need to merge with him, escape into him, now vanquished by the need to flee all control, all command, all *men*.

"I really don't think you should be at that apartment alone," he insists. She's about to open her mouth when he interrupts her "-and don't say you'll be fine. Stop underplaying what's happening. It's driving me goddamn nuts."

"I don't think it's necessary. My door bolts shut." Patricia knows it's a weak argument right after she pointed out he might have a gun. She just can't stand the idea of being under anyone's wing. She carved out a path for herself all on her own since she was seventeen. Independent from man or woman.

If you let someone take care of you, they have power over you. Plain and simple.

She's already given too much of her power away lately.

As if he can read her mind, Billy mutters, "This isn't about you being an independent woman, Trish. I already know you are. This is about you being in fucking danger." He guns the engine, breathes in a huff. "I don't get what the big deal is, anyway. We spend half the week

sleeping over as it is. What's a few more nights gonna hurt?"

"This just feels way too intense for me right now."

"You're in an intense situation. Calls for intense measures."

"No."

"Stay with a girlfriend then."

"No." Patricia doesn't know why she's turning that down too. A stubborn streak lashing out. Their gazes reflect each other, flashing heated blue. "I'll talk to the cops but that's as far as I'm going right now." She ends the conversation right there.

Billy glares at her for a beat. Then looks towards the black-wet road, shaking his head slowly. Clearly at his wit's end with her as L.A skyline shimmers past.

Another silent ride. No words spoken as he drives back to her apartment, Black Sabbath's "Electric Funeral" rattling from car speakers. A twisting, snake-like song that only increases the sense of impending doom.

Usually he'd sleep over but they both know that's not going to happen tonight.

He parks in front of her building and she reaches for the door handle, miserable about tonight's mayhem only continuing, ending so sourly. About how it's her own fault, slave to her own bullheadedness.

To her surprise, he softly takes her left hand in his before she gets out.

"I'll call you when I get home," he promises before he kisses her cheek. Sincere but his eyes carrying something heavy in them. Weighing them both down further.

Patricia nods. Presses lips to his mouth to lessen the damage, but there's still a wall up between them. She lets his hand go. An empty palm left behind.

That night she finds blood in her panties. She washes out crimson stains and presses a cold-damp cloth between her legs, sore and sniffing back tears.

Billy's call goes to voicemail.

Notes for the Chapter:

Yikes, sorry to end it there. Next couple chapters will be WAY lighter! A nice breather for y'all. :)

As usual, your comments keep me trucking, so please feel free to drop me one here or on my tumblr

Love u guyz <3

20. loving cup

Summary for the Chapter:

Patricia buys a new car and meets Billy's friend.

Notes for the Chapter:

Finally got this one finished. Definitely lighter in comparison to the last three chapters.

Enjoy! :)

Early October is hot enough to blister as Dave and Patricia enter the car dealership lot. A particularly bright business. A feast of candy color. Metal scalding neon beneath Venice sky.

“So glad you could come with.” Patricia peeks inside a turquoise Cadillac. Checks pink gloss matched to her off-the-shoulder shirt in the side mirror. Frowns at the lack of volume in her hair. Feels light-headed from skipping breakfast this morning, purging dinner the night before. Another relapse.

She'll stop, she assures herself. She's stopped so many times before.

But fitting into those dresses. Everyone watching...couldn't hurt to slim down.

“Billy's gonna be pissed at me,” Dave warns from beside her. “Isn't this something you should have asked him to do? Something kinda wrong about me being here instead.”

“Nah.” A watermelon-green bubble pops loudly between her lips as she fluffs honey locks. “He'd try to get me to buy some muscle car. Lecture me about transmission and all the technical parts. I just wanna pick something pretty.”

“I'll admit, he *is* a gear-head.”

“Also...” Patricia straightens to face him, lowers purple-tinted shades down her nose. Dream-vision going bland in one motion. A pause of

hesitation before she discloses, “we’re not exactly doing great right now.”

A fact she never expected to admit to Dave before this moment. Doe eyes and a kind smile drawing truth from behind the steeliest wall. Amy has a similar quality. You just *want* to open up to them.

But she hasn’t told Amy yet.

“Really?” he asks.

“Yeah, trouble in paradise.” *Paradise* might be a strong word. “You could probably tell after he stormed out at band practice.”

Dave’s eyebrow lifts. “I thought you guys made up in the parking lot.”

“Oh. That.” She winces, sunglasses coming back up to hide her expression. So strange to have it all brought up now when everything is filtered soothing lavender. Her night with Billy seems like horror porn in comparison, gothic and red as gore. White lightning over a hot car. The rush of an orgasm. Blood staining cotton. “Were we really obvious?”

Dave offers a light smile, worlds away from her unsettling flashback. “I think your exotic mating calls drowned out the entire block.”

“You all heard?” She knew Derek did, but she didn’t anticipate everyone inside the building hearing as well. Naive of her to think they wouldn’t.

“And saw.”

“You *saw*?”

“We all took a smoke break under the awning to watch the thunder storm. Didn’t expect to get *two* shows. Pretty impressive, the amount of bounce you guys got out of that Camaro.”

“Fuck.” Patricia looks away, burning and humiliated. Still sore too. Memories explode. Her begging for pain until Billy pulled away in

disgust. Being abandoned in the backseat. Billy smoking an entire cigarette outside in the dark as she steeped in shame within. A wilderness of turmoil.

“Not that we could see inside, windows being fogged up and all.” Dave chuckles, seemingly oblivious to her sudden urge to disappear into ether. “Nick didn’t say anything. Maybe he was too fucked up, but I’m positive he was jeal-”

Patricia slaps his bare arm a little too fiercely. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Topic change.”

“Hey.” Dave rubs stinging flesh. “Was just trying to lighten the mood. Kind of heavy with your ex showing up like that.”

“I know.” she says warily. “To be real, that entire night’s weighing pretty heavy on me right now. Let’s just focus on cars, alright?”

“Okay, sorry.” Dave gives a sympathetic nod, then dissolves into a grimace. “Just don’t tell Billy I came with you. He *will* kill me.”

“We wouldn’t want that.” Patricia glances at a yellow convertible. Points and coos. “*Ooh*, how about this one?”

“I don’t know if yellow’s your color.” Dave shakes brown ringlets and hums. “I think you’d look better in a red or a purple.”

The exact terminology she was hoping for. “You know, my last car was purple. Good eye.”

“It seems like a Patricia color.” Dave says as he also succumbs to his reflection. Ruffles his mane of curls in front of a car window. Adjusts his sleeveless band t-shirt. Brown shoulders strong and gleaming under the mid-day sun. “So, segwaying to a more pressing topic... you’re a big star now, huh?”

She tries to keep her tone breezy. “I’m neutral on that front.”

“No need to be shy,” he grins. “You’re on a billboard. You’re the most famous person I know as of now. You look really phenomenal onscreen, by the way. Total bombshell.”

"Thanks." She shifts awkwardly at that latter word, starting to hate it. Arms folding to armour herself. Already exhausted from the attention only after a couple of weeks.

"I gotta be honest with you though. The interviews are-what's happening there? Seems off."

Patricia frowns at his unexpected bluntness. "You haven't been talking to Billy, have you?"

"Honestly, I rarely ever talk to Billy these days unless it's during practice or at shows. Seems he's been a little distracted." Dave wiggles dark brows at her. "Why? Did he say something?"

"Well, he doesn't like the interviews either." Not comforting considering it's the whole point of the program.

"They're a bit...pornographic. Not your usual fare."

Patricia gives a sad shrug, trying not to let the growing judgement get to her. "It's just starting out. I'll have more serious questions as the show progresses."

"You're not gonna like me saying this but..." He lowers to a confiding murmur. "I miss your zine. Every time I go to buy a new album, I always check for Live Wire. Have to keep reminding myself it's over."

That stings. Plus, it's only been two months since the last issue. But he's not the only one. Fan mail continues to pour in, mourning the loss. Bringing guilt up to a roiling boil.

"If my magazine paid the amount that MTV did, trust me. I'd be doing that." A realization that makes her stomach sink.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm happy for you. Billy always said you should be making cash from what you do and he's right" He pauses before sighing dramatically. "Guess I'm just selfish. I wanna gobble up your writing and pictures again. It was just so...different. I miss that."

Patricia doesn't know what to say. She brought Dave here for relief from the pressure, but apparently she can't escape through him either.

Everybody wants something from her. Deciphering healthy requests from toxic ones growing more and more convoluted.

Then a salesman approaches. A mousy-haired young man in a boxy gray suit. Nervous and looking fresh out of high school.

“Hello there!” The boy beams a strained smile before his eyes snap open wide at Patricia taking off shades, revealing her face in full. “Holy crap...are you? Are you that chick from MTV?”

“Uh. Yes.” Patricia averts her gaze to glance around the parking lot. A rare anxiety in her at his gawking, not used to being recognized yet. Forces herself to smile back. “I’m here to spend my first paycheck.”

He’s red as a tomato now, struggling for composure. Breathing rapidly. Mouth opening and closing. A fish flopping wildly on the heat-drenched pavement. “Um. Wow. Of course. Wow. You’re... you’re...what were-what were you looking for?”

Patricia disappears behind shades again, uncomfortable with his starstruck ogling. “Something shiny.” She pops a perfect neon-green bubble. “Something pretty.”

She knows she sounds clueless. Typical dumb blonde.

And fuck it, when it comes to cars she absolutely is one.

“Sure...” The salesman blinks. Guides her two cars away to a dark blue vehicle, sleek and...far too familiar. “How about this one here? Great mileage. 87’ Camaro.”

Too blue. Too Billy.

“No, I don’t think so.” Patricia shakes her head. “Wrong color.”

“Yes, of course.” The salesman nods frantically as he points over her shoulder. “Um, other end of the lot we have a-”

“No.” Patricia cringes at the boring beige Mazda. “Sorry, wrong color, uh-“ she glances over him for a nametag. Sees none. “-what’s your name?”

The salesman gulps, still spiralling in her presence, adam's apple bobbing. "Randall. You can call me Randall. Or...anything you want." His voice breaks mouse-like on the last word.

"Think pretty, Randall." She touches his shoulder and watches his ears go an even deeper shade of red. "Show me the prettiest car you have."

"Pretty..." Randall visibly balks at the word. "You know, this is only my second day here and I don't know what you mean, really."

"Come on, Randall, buddy," Dave encourages. "You're real good at this, I can tell. Sell us a car."

"I don't-I don't know if I'm really into girly stuff. You should have seen me in art class..." He trails off with a nervous titter.

Patricia purses her lips, turns to Dave to exchange a wary glance. Neither impressed.

"That's alright. There's another dealership around the corner. They might know more about girly stuff." She juts her chin to her partner-in-crime. "Shall we go?"

"No, wait! Alright, uh-" Randall shifts from leg to leg, pondering for a beat before he snaps his fingers. "I think there's a really pretty one this way. Always catches my eye." He guides her past a long line of sparkling metal.

Patricia sees it and her mouth drops open.

There it is. Gleaming in golden rays. Titanium purple. Reflecting rainbows as she moves towards it. Impossibly prismatic.

And a *she*. A definite *she*.

Patricia clutches Dave's arm with a gasp, shaking him slightly. "That's it. That's the one!"

The salesman clears his throat. "This here's an 85' Firebird. Really aerodynamic car. Four speed auto transmission-"

“And she’s purple!” She turns to Randall, hands clasped with excitement. Nearly jumping. “Can I take her for a test drive?”

“You bet.” Randall brightens. Looking primed at the possibility of making his first sale. “This one seems really...you.”

After the keys get handed over, Dave and her hop in the precious vehicle simultaneously. Giggling playmates admiring the leather upholstery together, the shape and aesthetic. The purple dream rolls out the parking lot and she revels in the floor rumbling under her feet in a delicious purr.

“She’s technically a muscle car, you know.” Dave points out. “You and Billy got similar taste.”

She shrugs that off, feeling cold and bristly. Doesn’t want to hear about him right now. Walls up. “But most importantly, she’s *pretty*.”

Patricia turns the radio on to the nearest rock station, the sound system blasting deep, rough tones. She drives a bit more recklessly than she should when Motley Crue comes on with *Helter Skelter*, Dave and her both belting out the lyrics in perfect harmony. Unable to tell whether it’s the fast car or Dave’s angelic voice sending goosebumps up her arms.

Then she spots an abandoned parking lot to her left. Beckoning to her, inviting chaos. Invoking a *probably* bad idea in her, already high off new car smell.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she asks suggestively.

“Motley Crue rules?”

“Well yes, but no.” She makes a sharp turn into the empty lot. “I was thinking that I never have enough fun.”

The Firebird reaches the centre and proceeds to donut wildly. Fast and loud. Wheels spinning, car twirling. Dust rising in thick clouds off pavement.

“Shit, I think the fame’s getting to you, Trish!” Dave cackles, jerking forward as she breaks suddenly. They proceed to spin again, a little

smoother this time. “Woo!” He makes the devil horns sign out the window in solidarity. Both of them laughing like mischievous kids at the adrenaline-fuelled mayhem. Guitars squealing beautifully in the background.

She screeches back into the car dealership lot, flushed with exhilaration. Sunglasses swept down to the tip of her nose. Eyes wild at their newbie salesman, disorienting him even further. “She’s the one, Randall. Pretty *and* fast.”

Patricia becomes Randall’s very first customer that afternoon.

*

After a lullingly slow day of grocery shopping, Patricia drives home. Feeling in control again. Powerful and mighty in her new, shiny car. Catching glances from pedestrians and fellow drivers though it’s hard to tell whether it’s from her car or just...her. She wonders how recognizable she really is. She never anticipated what it would feel like to be- dare she think it?- *famous*.

The way Randall looked at her was above and beyond any type of attention she’s experienced before. Like she wasn’t human. A unicorn or a mermaid to ogle, snap pictures of. A mythical beast to worship and fear. More fawning than any stranger deserves or needs.

Famous. Brings to mind flashing bulbs, glittering gowns, freakishly white teeth.

The word echoes in her brain as she closes in towards her apartment, humming along to the guilty pleasure of top forty radio. When she’s about to turn into the parking garage she sees something red.

She slams her breaks, car lurching. Seat belt pinching into flesh. The manic drumbeat of her pulse in her ears.

Derek’s convertible. A crimson omen parked on the side of the road, catching the glint of piercing sun. An empty driver’s seat.

There’s only a split second of thinking. She goes with gut instinct. Passes right by her apartment and drives straight towards Billy’s place, grateful that some of the items she just purchased include a

new toothbrush and deodorant. A pair of clean panties still stowed in her purse in case of an impromptu sleepover at the very home she's driving to.

It's getting worse and worse. Billy was right. Of course they provoked Derek flaunting their sexual relationship in front of him like that. She's so stupid. Who knows what he's doing in there now. Leaving doll heads and thorned roses. Maybe waiting around her door for her to come home. The latter thought strikes a bolt of panic in her.

As she nears her destination, she realizes that she easily could have driven to Amy's place instead. She knows for a fact she's home right now.

But no, Billy feels safest. A haven from this disturbing reality. A fact she wouldn't admit unless scared shitless like she is now. Calcified emotion dissolves. Eyes mist up despite herself at how much she needs to see him, curl into him for comfort. Burrow her face against his chest and surrender.

There's no parking in front of Billy's apartment so she pulls over down the street. Walking the block to his place and hoping he's home. Worried that things will be tense between them again. Though tense right now is far better than feeling unsafe, terrified.

To her surprise he's already outside, a couple yards away from the front entrance. Unbearably handsome in simple blue jeans and a snug white t-shirt. Strolling alongside an elderly lady in a blush-coloured blouse, slacks to match, graced with a cream-white swirl of hair.

He holds a hefty paper bag of groceries under his arm, walking slow to keep pace with her turtle-like waddle. His rasp of a laugh echoing across the pavement, clearly enjoying whatever banter they're engaged in. He looks up and sees Patricia cross the grass, pausing mid-chuckle as she closes the gap between them.

"Hey you." Patricia croaks, unsure how to act around Grandma when she's brimming with panicked adrenaline. Flicking blonde tresses behind her shoulder to give her hands something to do.

"Well, well." Billy adjusts the paper bag in his arm with a small smile

that fills her with relief. Gaze touching soft as petals over her face. "Fancy seeing a pretty lady like you around here." He spares a humorous glance at the old woman, now staring at her. "Another pretty lady that is. Mrs. Hobbes. Patricia. Patricia. Mrs. Hobbes."

"Hi." Patricia waves a stiff but friendly hand.

"You..." Mrs Hobbes points slowly at her. A pleasant face etched with a flurry of lines shifting as she sizes Patricia up. "I've seen you! I've seen you somewhere."

"She's on T.V.," Billy says quickly. "Has her own show. Very famous chick."

"Yes, that's it!" Mrs. Hobbes nods her head, white curls bobbing. Admirably styled. "Are you on Dynasty? I think I've seen you on Dynasty."

Patricia shakes her head with a gentle smile, amusement winning over anxiety. "I'm on MTV."

Mrs. Hobbes continues to squint as Billy holds the apartment entrance door open for her. "I could have sworn I've seen you on Dynasty." She turns and shuffles over red carpet into the foyer.

"Is she your girlfriend?" Mrs. Hobbes looks to Billy for confirmation as they follow behind her.

"That's what I keep telling people," he drawls smooth. "What I keep dreamin' about."

Patricia is startled by how jelly-legged she gets from that, flooding with shimmering sparkles. "Yes," she says firmly, full of sudden resolve. Billy gives her warm eyes in turn. "Yes, I am."

"How romantic," Mrs. Hobbes crows. "Like one of my Harlequin novels. The handsome bodybuilder and the beautiful actress."

"Journalist." Patricia corrects.

"Drummer." Billy grunts.

“Well, you *look* like an actress.” Mrs. Hobbes guides them both through her apartment door, only a few steps away from the entrance. They’re soon enveloped by shades of pastel green. Antique vases, porcelain figurines, the faint smell of violets. The opening theme for *Days of Our Lives* playing on an old television in the background. “And you look like you need a haircut, young man.”

Billy just chuckles, leans towards Patricia to lower his voice. “I’m gonna put this stuff away, then we’ll go.”

“Oh, you both can stay here for tea.” Mrs. Hobbes pipes up. A fluffy white cat with sapphire-blue eyes emerges from a corner and twines around Billy’s legs, then Patricia’s. Meowing sweet and piercing.

Billy shakes his head for the both of them, walking over to the kitchen counter to place the heavy paper bag down. “Thanks for the offer, Mrs. Hobbes, but me and my girl need to catch up.” He promptly empties the bag, taking out boxes of earl grey tea, a loaf of bread, tins of cat food, Granny Smith apples. Opening cupboards to put them all away like he’s done this a hundred times before.

Patricia’s heart can’t take it.

“Fine, I’ll let you two go.” Mrs. Hobbes scowls at their quick departure. Pokes Patricia in the shoulder. “But don’t stay a stranger, dear! I want to know all about your little show. We’ll have tea and watch soaps.”

“I’d like that.” Patricia flashes a smile, wondering how many times Billy’s been forced into that exact situation.

Mrs. Hobbes proceeds to sit down in a baby blue chair at the kitchen table, sighing so loudly Patricia feels sorry for leaving. “Take an apple, Mr. Hargrove. You need more fruit in your diet.”

A moment later, they’re out the door, shiny Granny Smith in Billy’s hand.

“That is too cute, you carrying her groceries like that.” Patricia says. Declines as he offers the apple to her. Watches him take a big bite into green, crisp flesh, salivating at the thought of tart juice on her

tongue.

"I stole a rose from her. Least I could do is help her out." Billy mumbles between mouthfuls. "It's a good thing we escaped when we did though. I don't think I could handle another fucking episode of Days of Our Lives." Traumatic memories creep behind his eyes.

"I knew she roped you into it," Patricia laughs. Pushing open the front entrance door, stepping back into fresh air.

"She's good at coercing." Billy smirks as they stroll over the lawn together, chewing and talking. "One minute I'm opening the door for her, the next I'm on my third cup, wondering which asshole got Hope pregnant."

"Sounds about right." She snorts at the visual of Billy with dainty porcelain between his fingers, transfixed on the drama. "Definitely been there before."

They're so calm together now, even with her underlying anxiety about Derek. Natural ease. Whatever disaster took place between them in the backseat of his car seeming like another life. Night and day, effortlessly slipping into light banter. Perplexing how they can experience two worlds that contrast so drastically.

That's probably why she still hasn't mentioned Derek yet. She likes the calm a lot more than whatever reaction Billy is going to have when she says his name.

Peace. Can't they ever have peace?

"Nothing ever gets resolved on that show." Billy squints against tangerine sun, stepping onto the sidewalk. "That's how those fuckers get you hooked."

"A cliffhanger every episode."

"Exactly." Billy huffs, then shifts to a more gentle tone. "I just feel bad, sweet old lady living all alone like that. Her kids live in Seattle. No family out here. So I just hang out with her sometimes, give her and Alfred some company."

“Alfred?”

“Her cat. Gnarly little dude. Climbs on your head when you least expect it.” He pauses, glances around at passing palm trees. “So... where the hell are we going, Trish?” He tosses the apple core into some bushes.

She give him coy side-eye. “To my new car.”

“You got a new car?” Long-lashed eyes widen, excitement palpable enough to burst through his flesh. “Fuck, I should have guessed when you just showed up outta nowhere.”

“Want to help me get my duffel bag out of the trunk? I’ve got groceries too.”

“*Duffel bag...*” Billy echoes. “Wait-does this mean you’re?...” He gives her a hopeful once-over.

“Staying with you? Yes, just until things stabilize.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

He breathes a heavy sigh. “Thank fucking god. Hey, wait.” He grabs her hand. Pulls her in for a big hug, crushing her into his chest. “So we’re cool?”

She hates how when he asks that, she’s not sure. But she likes his warmth. Likes being cradled here in the middle of the sidewalk. Likes the thought of sleeping in his bed. She peeks up at his earnest face. “I want to be.”

She can tell he would have preferred a simple yes, but he kisses her forehead and says, “Me too.”

They both know nothing’s simple right now.

“What changed your mind?” he murmurs.

And that’s when she lies again. Doesn’t want to burst their beautiful

little bubble, so fragile right now. The slightest breeze ready to pop it. She must protect this delicate rebirth. “I just realized I feel safer when I’m with you.” She guiltily nestles her cheek against his shirt.

Patricia tells herself then she’ll talk to the cops soon. That she’s not being irresponsible, she just wants to save their relationship. She’ll move into a new apartment to match her new car, and Derek will be thrown off the scent.

“I’m glad,” Billy sways them both slightly as if to soothe her. “I want you to feel safe.”

Another moment and she pulls away slowly. “Are you ready to see?”

“Are you kidding? I’m beyond stoked.”

She locks her fingers through his, guides him down the street and turns a corner. Her titanium baby comes into view, glittering unreal shades of purple, shifting colors with every step.

“*Woah*,” he gawks at her side. “Holy shit!”

“I know, right?” She hops inadvertently, her arm swinging his. Beaming. Freshly excited from his enthusiasm.

“When did you get her?”

“This morning.”

“Wow.” He lets go of her hand to loop an arm around her shoulders, squeezing her to him. Gawking some more. “She’s a fucking beauty.”

“I’m so glad you like her.”

“Hot *damn*.” He whistles loudly, releasing her to circle the vehicle. Eyes running over every nook and cranny. “I’m in love.”

That sentence from his lips makes her weak for some reason. “I’m head over *wheels* in love.”

He snorts at her bad joke, then bends to peer inside the driver’s window. “To be honest, I was kind of hoping I’d come with you to get

your new car, but shit....that is fucking *nice*. Perfect choice. So Trish too."

She bites her lip with a shred of regret. "Dave said you'd be disappointed about not being there."

He perks up, looks over the hood of the car at her. "He's seen it already?"

Whoops.

"He came with me to buy it." She winces as the words blurt out. Sorry, Dave.

His brows raise, mouth parting with shock. "You brought *Dave* over me?" Pale eyes go stormy with hurt. "*Why?*"

Fuck. Already she's popped the bubble.

She rounds the car to unlock the trunk. "To be fair, we were kind of in a bad spot and I was afraid you'd go all gear-head on me and make me buy a muscle car--"

"This *is* a muscle car."

"I know," she says wearily, "I was just feeling weird about us."

He pauses at that, drawing close to her. "How do you feel about us now?" A trace of worry lacing the question. "Be honest."

"I'm feeling a bit better, but it's gonna take some time," she admits. Absorbing him for a beat, eyes scanning as she musters up words she didn't plan to say. "About that night...sorry for being so...stubborn. Not answering your call."

"I'm sorry too," he shrugs, looking away. Scratching his neck like a nervous tick. "I was being way too intense again. Feel guilty as hell about that entire night, if I'm being real."

"What happened wasn't your fault and things *are* pretty intense right now." An understatement. "You were just trying to help considering the circumstances."

"Hm." A gentle grin emerges. "Glad you noticed that."

A beat before she has a moment of clarity. "Swear you won't get mad at Dave?"

"I dunno," Billy drawls, "this is definitely one of his top ten betrayals."

Her eyes narrow. "What's his worst betrayal?" She can't imagine Dave betraying anyone.

"Smashing his guitar through my bass drum."

"What? That's terrible!" Patricia didn't think Dave had it in him to stoop so low.

"He's still on my shit-list for that one."

"When did that happen? Why?"

"Senior year of highschool. We were drunk. I said his hair looked bad and he retaliated."

Patricia can't help but cackle at that scenario. "Just *please* don't say anything to him. He already felt so bad about it when we were there. I shouldn't have told you. I kind of forced him into it and he asked me not to tell."

"Yeah, because he knows me." A sardonic twitch touches the corner of his mouth. "Fine, I won't say anything. But I'll be plotting his demise inside."

"Thank you." She reaches in the trunk, hauls her duffel bag over her shoulder. "After we put this away, wanna go for a drive with me down to the beach?"

His eyes soften. "Absolutely." He leans to give her a quick kiss, pulls back with a smarmy grin. "And you can make up for your end of the betrayal by watching endless bad kung fu movies with me tonight."

"The worst torture," she smirks. "Didn't you and Dave used to watch those together?"

“Exactly. Everything’s gone sideways around here.” He retrieves heavy grocery bags from out of the trunk. “For one, apparently I’m a fucking bag boy now.”

“My bag boy.” She elbows him, enjoying how he beams bright in return.

“That’s right, baby.” He shuts the trunk with a boyish wink. “Tonight, I’m *all* yours.”

21. wild things run fast

Notes for the Chapter:

hey, sorry it keeps taking me longer and longer to upload lately. life is making it harder to keep up with weekly uploads so i will likely be slower unless i get some mammoth writing energy. (please send good writing vibes so this can happen lol)

this is a very domestic, relationship-focused chapter, tinged with an undercurrent of angst.

TW: trish being hella paranoid, rather long and self indulgent smut scene(but that is this entire fic so..i hope you guys are here for that lmao), mentions of bulimia/vomit, very long dialogue/serious relationship talk*gasp*

hope you enjoy :)

Approaching velvet midnight, Billy's fallen asleep. Naked and happily dozing. Heavy-limbed and sprawled in bed as blue television glow travels down his skin. A tan leg kicked out from under his thin white sheet. An arm cradled under Patricia's neck, her cheek tucked against the firm warmth of his chest.

Restless, her wandering eyes absorb the small apartment. The television now playing chatty infomercials, the open bathroom door revealing porcelain.

Beckoning for her to purge.

It was such a picture-perfect evening. A drive down to sunset-kissed beach. Eating at a taco stand on the pier. Returning to his place to watch badly-dubbed kung fu movies, both of them laughing to tears at bad effects and cheesy dialogue. A feeling of total immersion, relaxing into each other, seamlessly fitted. A reprieve from the near-constant anxiety that permeates her mind lately.

Until now.

Now she's staring at his bathroom door wondering whether or not to commit the covert act, the one she specifically told him was long gone from her life.

It's doubtful she could get away with it. It's a small apartment. The walls are thin. He'd likely hear the retching.

Maybe she could run the tap, drown out the sound...

No. A mental slap to the face. She *has* to stop. Can't allow herself to go down that dark valley again. She's already dropped a few pounds. Knows it's wrong. Knows how desperately bad it can get. The realm of acid-lined teeth and rust-raw throat, hair falling out in blonde clumps, ghostly thin and wasting away as her chest burns, wrists weak and snap-able. A gnawing, grasping void inside to over-fill and expunge. Every mirror offering a fun-house reflection to punish and analyze.

Why continue when she knows what insanity lies beyond? She liked how she looked not so long ago, was feeling so secure in her skin after so much hard work to get better. Felt proud of who she was. Her body, her personality, how she presented herself. She was strong.

At least on the surface. Turns out she was weak after all. Shattered by one off-hand comment on her body from a stranger. Spiralling back down to the dank basement of herself she thought she crawled out of years ago.

Why is it so easy to return?

A serpentine voice in her mind hisses, "*Because suffering is home sweet home, Patty-baby.*"

Then Billy's breath catches next to her. She glances up to see sleep-struck eyes flicker open, his body shifting under her cheek as he stirs awake. Sharp in his timing, as if he can hear her list of anxieties being read out. He brings her tighter to him, presses sleepy soft kisses into her flesh.

She gets distracted. Electric prickles of desire forcing self-loathing to

take a backseat. Apparently it's just as easy to forget suffering when they're together.

Another thing that makes her weak: *him*.

"Mmm, princess," he mumbles into her skin. Goosebumps at the sensation of stubble and the heat of his mouth.

"You passed out." She pushes tendrils of golden locks off his brow, shifts even closer.

"Woke up next to an angel," he purrs. His fingers stroke down the collar of her wide-necked shirt, pulling fabric down to kiss her shoulder. Playfully bite. Hand moving up again to cup behind her neck, pull her into him for a deep kiss.

Lips open to each other like the bloom of roses. Dance in a unison beyond sublime, a sensual play of tongue and flesh. It's always like this, but right now it's almost too much. Painfully beautiful. One of the few gifts from the universe in her increasingly deadly world. Like crimson flowers blooming in a wasteland, bursting through pavement.

"Want you," Billy murmurs, hands everywhere. Molten in an instant. Fingers sliding under her shirt, squeezing the flesh of her naked breasts, her bare thighs and ass. Overpowering her with his body, his want.

He travels slow down her body, spreads her legs and settles his face between to give her long lustrous licks. Her mouth quickly shifting to an O of pleasure as he sucks her folds between his lips. Circles his tongue around her clit, bathes it with insistent strokes.

When he begins to insert a finger, she stiffens. "I'm...still sore."

Billy pauses at that, eyes going guilty. Then those same fingers wrap strong around her thigh, match his other hand. Firm in his embrace. No room to escape from the growing ecstasy as he gives loving attention to her bud. Hot tongue painting her with his desire, until she comes, twitching and writhing against his mouth.

"Pretty baby," He presses his mouth into her inner thigh. "Never get

tired of watching you.” A kiss on her belly. “Like watching heaven rain down.”

When he finally kisses his way up to her mouth, she makes her own way down his body. Paying careful attention to each and every inch. Makes him laugh breathily when she ghosts kisses below his belly button. “Does that tickle?” She gently bites, leaves teeth marks.

He shivers with a light chuckle. “Yes.” His stomach twitches as he goes breathless. She takes his hand length in her hand, caresses gentle at first, then harder, precum dripping over her fingers.

Right before her mouth descends, he says “Move your ass up here.”

“You want me to..?”

“Want your pussy in my face, baby.”

She complies, straddling his head. Smothering. “I don’t think we’ve done this before.”

“This should be how we greet each other in my opinion.” Billy’s voice muffles as he buries his face in her.

She gives a breathless gasp as he finds her clit, sucking, laving with a smooth roll of his jaw. When she wraps her mouth around the tip of his wet cock, he stops underneath her.

“Just a warning,” he says, “I’m probably gonna come fast, and there’s probably gonna be a lot. It’s uh...been awhile.”

It hits her then that for the last two times he made her come, he didn’t come at all. “You didn’t jerk off?”

“Feels lame without you there.” Another lick that makes her moan. “Plus I haven’t really needed to jerk off since highschool.”

Patricia snorts at how cocky that statement is, memories of condoms bursting out of his glove compartment returning. “Well, aren’t you just-” She trails off as he returns to her clit.

Her hand moves up and down his shaft, then she takes him in her

mouth greedily. Feeling him twitch under her with pleasure as she caresses his balls. Already feeling the quick buildup to her own climax, difficult to keep a steady pace as she gets distracted by his merciless tongue. Moaning around his cock, the vibration making him give his own gruff sound of pleasure in turn. Though his speed never falters.

A trembling orgasm travels up her core, and as if on cue, his hips jerk, releasing into her mouth in thick, salty spurts of fluid, jetting down her throat. She swallows it all, even as she comes in turn. Climaxing into each other's mouths at the same time. Her juices coating his mouth and chin, as his travel down into her belly, leaving them both a panting mess.

He shifts her hips off his face, reaches for his shirt at the edge of the bed to wipe her slick off himself. She moves around to face him, curling up into his arms, as their mouths meet for a debaucherously wet kiss. "Fuck. Too sexy."

"I don't know how you can focus so well," she smiles. "Hard to pay attention when you're getting me off at the same time."

"I like the challenge." Their lips meet again. Sated with woozy pleasure.

After a few moments of laying in each others arms, Trish is still burning with desire, and Billy's still hard. She takes his dick in her hands and starts pumping him again. "I wanna try doing it."

"Yeah? You sure?"

She nods. "Just go super slow."

They shift to their sides, Billy spooning her, his hand on hers to guide her fingers over his cock. An invitation to guide him in.

She lines him up. Slowly sinks down his shaft with a small gasp. Hears his hissing intake of breath at the sensation of her slippery-hot sheathe surrounding him. A subtle moan from her lips as he fills her to the brink, a twinge of soreness but the pressure against all the right spots overwhelms anything else. His hand smooth up her

stomach, pulls her closer into him.

“God, you’re like fucking silk inside,” he rasps, cupping her breast with possessive familiarity. Hips beginning a slow writhe. “You good?”

“Yes.” She looks behind to take in his heated gaze. “Mmh-you feel amazing.” His hand travels up to her cheek, knuckles grazing.

“I-” He groans as she tightens around him, bats her lashes. His mouth parts with desire in turn. “Fuck, you’re gorgeous.” Fingers cup the back of her head, pull her close for a kiss that could incinerate the iciest heart. Leaves her molten, heart blooming. Sparkling gold flames. “So glad you’re here, sweetheart.”

He finds her clit then, two fingers languidly orbiting. Slowly wringing pleasure up her spine, every cell in her body. Thrusting precise and smooth all the while.

“You can-oh my god- a little faster”, she murmurs, already on the brink of a third orgasm. “I’m close...” Her eyes snap shut out of habit.

He grinds inside of her at a more insistent tempo, stoking her flames to an unbearable level of heat. His other arm moving under her neck to cradle her head. Keeping her still in his grasp, facing him. “Look at me.” A burning sea of blue meets her when she opens her eyes. “Look at me when you come.”

A beautiful explosion, far more powerful than her previous climaxes with Billy’s cock to clench down on. Strong enough that she can’t keep her eyes from rolling back, lashes fluttering. The sight of her release driving Billy to his own orgasm, the hot flood of his come inside her, his rough groan in her ear. Fingers clenching into her hair, tugging at the roots slightly. A whirlwind of passion. Gone. Swept away.

After a moment of obliteration, they both finally drift to awareness, the world dreamily spinning, spinning. Breaths heavy. Mouths meeting for kisses, full of the sweetest honey. Warm murmurs of affection on Billy’s tongue. He slowly pulls out, the gush of his come oozing down her inner thigh.

A groan under his breath, shaft now running up and down her slit. Still thick and hard. Mixing their fluids over her swollen folds. Elicits a gasp as he rubs her clit again with the head of his cock.

"Billy..." Trish moans at how sensitive she is there now. Throbbing. Too much. "I dunno if I can go again."

But she does. Trembles in his arms once more, until there's nothing left.

*

Patricia starts the morning by making coffee. Digging out Billy's dusty coffee maker, wiping it clean. Skin warm under Billy's freshly laundered t-shirt. Bare feet on cool linoleum. Feeling cozy, yet ... claustrophobic. The tiny apartment closing in on her, nowhere for to go for privacy except the bathroom. Nowhere to release the part of herself that keeps clawing up from the grave. She imagines this situation happening for weeks on end. Gets cagey.

He'll discover her secrets eventually.

"You brought the good stuff, huh?" Strong, masculine arms wrap around her. Inhale her scent from behind. Bare chest and the cotton of his briefs pressing into her. "Love that shit."

"You're welcome." She turns her head for a quick kiss. "Oh wait, were you talking about the coffee?"

Billy releases her with a grin. Retrieves a pan from the bottom cupboard and places it on the stove. Opens the fridge and peeks inside. "How many eggs do you want?"

She was hoping he wouldn't ask about breakfast, a meal she's been skipping since her job at MTV began. The thought of food right now makes her feel out of control. Think of pounds piling. Struggling to fit in clothes that get tighter and tighter. Suffocating. "Um." She scoops ground beans into the coffee filter. "I'm not really hungry."

The fridge closes. "You sure?"

She glances over and meets Billy's concerned gaze. She tenses,

quickly looks away, now freaked out that he can see right through her. "I ate a lot last night."

"Alright..." Billy cracks open an egg in the pan. Says nothing more but his silence speaks volumes.

Guilt wracks her. She frets for a moment. Then pads over to him and twines arms around his waist. Squeezes him and kisses his cheek. "Actually, I'll have one egg. Sunny side up."

There. That wasn't so hard, was it? What's the big deal?

"Cool." Another egg cracks open. Yolk sizzles. Patricia catches the slightest touch of relief in his eyes. Doesn't like it.

She sits at the small table for two by the window, newspaper open to the classifieds as she sips from a mug of black coffee. Antsy. Spots apartments for rent in Hollywood that she'd always long for and have no hope to move into. Unreal views. Multiple rooms. Shiny and new. Apartments she can actually afford now. One with a move-in date for the middle of the month catches her eye.

The sooner the better.

She takes a red felt out of her purse and starts circling, toe tapping.

"Whatcha doin'?" Billy's spatula transfers a finished egg onto a plate. "Shit, you want toast? Forgot to ask."

"Looking for apartments," she says cautiously. "And no, I'm good, thanks."

"Oh." A surprised look over his shoulder at her. "Finding a place for November?"

She meets his eyes over the paper. "The fifteenth, actually."

A pause. "That's like...a week from now."

"I know."

"What's the rush?" he frowns. "You're gonna move your stuff and

sleep here?"

"No." She sets the paper on the table. Clears her throat. "Uh, Billy, I don't know if I can stay for the rest of the month." She peers down to scan sightlessly over the ads, so she won't have to see his disappointment. "I think it's better that we have space, you know?"

He walks over, places her breakfast in front of her. A perfect circle. A golden sun inside. "I don't mind having you around."

"How can you even know that? It's been less than a day."

"Exactly." He sits down across from her. "You just got here, Trish. Let's chill for a fuckin' second."

"I need my own space. Your bedroom is the living room." She gestures around the studio apartment. "Everything's so...open. I need privacy. I can't get that here."

"Okay," His fork slices into egg. Yolk runs golden and thick. "Then kick me out for a few hours and do whatever you want."

She stiffens up. His insistence makes her want to sink in her seat like a toddler, arms crossed and petulant. Makes her feel trapped. "No."

Billy's expression goes sullen, and for a brief second she sees the flash of a boy, something hurt and way too broken there. Abandoned. A pang of remorse rises in her throat.

He gulps back coffee. Stares at her marker making blood red circles. Leans forward, reading the paper upside down. Steals it away from her to gape at the prices. "Two *thousand* a month?"

She ignores his shock. Snatches the paper back from him. "There's a gym in the building. You can come and work out with me."

"How much is MTV paying you anyway?" A look of perplexed curiosity on his face.

"A hell of a lot more than I ever made with my zine, that's for sure."

Another sip of caffeine. A crunch into buttery toast. "Why won't you

tell me?"

"Because it's private."

A shadow of annoyance darts in the back of his eyes. "*Private Patricia*," he hums under his breath. "Guess I should expect that by now."

She flinches, hates how that sounds. "Billy? The more you push, the more I'm going to pull away, okay?" A blurted fact that lands heavy. Makes Billy go still to absorb it, looking regretful.

"Hey, I don't want you to feel pressured, I just—"

"Well, you're *making* me feel pressured. So stop."

"I'm sorry." A long exhale as he runs a hand through his hair. "Just, when you said you were staying until things stabilized, I thought it'd be longer than a week. Doesn't feel like a week is going to be enough for things to stabilize."

"I should have been more specific."

He sucks at his teeth, quiet for a moment. "Trish, I don't want to smother you or whatever. It's just, this hot and cold thing again. It's fucking with my head. Feels like you were all excited to stay. And then the next day, bam, you're gearing up to leave again."

"Shouldn't I be looking for a new place now that I'm being stalked? Why wouldn't you want me to do that?"

"Well, when you put it that way I sound like an asshole," he sighs. "It's not that you're looking for a place. It's how fast you're doing it after saying you wanted to stay. It's the first thing on your mind. Like, we can't even just relax and enjoy the morning without you itching to leave. Can't help but feel like you don't really wanna be around me." His eyes seem to go a bleaker shade of blue. Oceans murky and deep.

Her guilt grows even further. "Billy, I *do* like being around you. But I've never lived with any guy ever. This is a big step for me, even just a week. And we've only been dating a month and a half. The idea of

staying together for the rest of the month just feels like a lot.”

And they haven’t even said they love each other yet. How can they live together?

That thought that takes her off guard. She pushes it away.

“Look.” A hand covers hers. “I don’t know how this shit works. I’ve never been in like...a real relationship before. And I feel like this is really real, whatever’s between us. I don’t wanna fuck that up”

“Neither do I.”

Then that same sinister voice in her head comes in, *“But you are fucking it up, aren’t you, baby? You always fuck everything up.”*

Billy’s gentle tone continues, “But above everything else, I just wanna watch out for you. That’s what this was all about to begin with. All the crazy stuff that’s happening. It’s kind of my job as boyfriend. You know, the guy takes care of the girl.”

“A new apartment is going to change things. Derek won’t know where I live.” She mulls over his last sentence, gets touchy. “Why can’t we take care of each other equally? And stay independent.”

“We could. But in your current situation, seems like you need taking care of the most. And who the fuck knows with your insane ex what the hell’s going to happen, even if you do move. Plus, I’m just used to things being like...”

“Like what?”

He hesitates. “You’re gonna be pissed at me for saying this, but I was raised being told that the guy...he’s the protector, the head honcho. Brings home the bacon, takes care of his family-”

Patricia scoffs at that. Thinks it’s so dated. “And what’s the girl doing? Baking pies in the kitchen all day, knee-deep in crawling babies?” She gets an image of herself hovering over the stove. Hair shining in pristine curls. A wide-eyed pathetic look on her face. A red and white polka dot apron over her torso, naked underneath, bottom peeking out. She breaks into laughter at that retro male fantasy.

“That is, if she isn’t waiting for you with her legs wide open.”

“I’m not *that* cliché, but there are definitely parts of that old-fashioned shit in me.”

She snaps open her paper, turns the page and pretends to read. “Well, this is the eighties, dude. Get with the fucking program.”

“I’m guessing you don’t think that’s chivalrous.”

She finds herself getting more heated, his words touching a nerve. “Feels more like going backwards, especially after all the progress we’ve made as women. Like, do you know how hard it’s been for us to get to this point? How hard it still is? How much bullshit I’ve had to put up with because of that perception?”

He puts his palms up in surrender. “I don’t *want* to feel that way, but conservative-as-fuck Dad. Sexist society. Nothing but bad influences from day one.”

“Time to undo your programming then. Where’s your reset button?” She leans over to poke his forehead. “Ah, there you go. Welcome to 1987.”

“Wow, thanks,” Billy’s eyes roll before he gives a soft smirk. “Don’t get me wrong, I like how you’re independent. Dug that from day one. But you’re also so fucking cute and tiny, it’s kinda my natural instinct to wanna take care of you.” He reaches across to ruffle her hair with a grin. “Realistically, at least on the physical level, the bigger person takes care of the tiny person.”

She snorts, adjusting her tousled locks, still frustrated. “Five foot four isn’t that tiny.”

“Tinier than me.”

“I don’t mind being taken care of now and then. Just don’t like being told what to do.” A dramatic pause. “Ever.”

“Me neither.” He shakes his head. “Just call me out when I’m being a sexist dick then. I can take it.”

She takes a sip of lukewarm coffee. "Since when do I not?"

"Very true."

"And it's a two way street, being equals and all," she says helpfully. "You can always call me out when I'm being a bitch. I know I can be one the majority of the time."

"Hah." He stretches his arms behind his head, reaches with a groan. "Not falling for that one."

Patricia smiles at his wisdom. "Just don't actually say the word *bitch*." She pauses. "The reason I don't want to tell you how much I'm making is because I don't want you to feel emasculated by me making more than you."

"Well, I'm gonna be visiting your fancy apartment and getting driven around in your fancy car, so it's gonna be kind of obvious either way, isn't it?"

She takes a moment to look him over, then relents. "I'm making ten grand a month. To start."

"Damn." His eyes widen. "That's awesome, Trish."

She hopes that's a genuine response. "I just don't want the financial differences between us to make things weird."

"To be honest, I think everyone recognizing you wherever we go is gonna be way weirder for me."

"In a bad way?" she winces.

"I don't know yet," he shrugs. "Guess it's just gonna take some getting used to."

"Tell me about it." They both drift off into silence.

Billy finishes off the last of his toast, downs the last dregs of coffee from his mug. Sets it down with a heavy sigh, eyes reluctant. "Hey, sorry for making you feel bad about looking for places. If you need to go, go. That's obviously your call. Just know I'll be ringing you up

every damn day because I'll be worried fucking sick about you. Could barely sleep after your ex showed up and you were staying alone in that apartment. Just kept imagining him going back there again."

She still doesn't relay that Dereks's done just that. That it's the exact reason why she's here now. "I'm going to see the cops soon." Something to quell their mutual anxiety, Though the thought of dealing with this situation legally only peaks hers more.

"Good. When?"

"Within the next few days."

"You want me to come with?"

"I don't know. Maybe." She trembles in her chair as it all hits her. Thoroughly overwhelmed. She leans her elbows on the table, rests her chin in her hands. "There's so much happening, Billy. It's like... we never get to breathe."

"I know. I just wanna chill with you but every day there's some new intense shit."

She reaches across to twine her fingers through his, his warmth spreading up her arm. "Let's be calm as we can right now. Appreciate the moment while it lasts."

"You say that like you know something bad's gonna happen."

Her lashes lower, voice fragile. "Something bad *always* happens."

"I feel like if you say it, you might make it so. Self-fulfilling prophecy or whatever the fuck."

"You sound like my Aunt Doris," she smiles. "She always says words are spells so be careful what you say."

"I dunno about spells but a positive attitude never hurt."

She squeezes his hand. "Look at you. Mr. Optimism."

"Wasn't always that way, believe me." Billy reaches his fork over to

her untouched egg. Takes a bite. Swallows. "You get along with your Aunt?"

"Yeah, I lived with her after Ma went to rehab for.... heroin." She realizes then she's never told him that. Billy takes it in quietly, a flicker of sorrow over his face. "So...since I was about nine or ten. She kind of became my new mom. She's a good woman. Beautiful soul."

"I like her already," Billy says softly.

"She lives out in Santa Barbara."

"Nice. They got sweet waves out there. I've heard good things."

"Maybe..." An exciting idea comes to her. "You could visit her with me one day." Visuals of just the two of them walking the Santa Barbara shoreline flood her mind. Picking snap peas and tomatoes from her aunt's garden. Inhaling sun-warmed jasmine. Kissing under the peaceful stars, waves crashing in the distance, miles away from the stink of concrete jungle.

Billy gives a slight nod. A small smile. Keeps his response short, as if not to jinx it. "Sure."

"I think you two would get along."

"I'd like to find out." He gives her a look so full of empathy it makes her choke up. Want to dissolve into her chair and disappear from the powerful emotion unleashing in her. "I'm really glad things got better for you. That you have someone in your life like her."

"They did," she sniffs, holding back an avalanche of feeling at him bringing up her aunt that way. A desperate gratitude. "She changed my life. I don't know who I'd be or where I'd be without her."

Doesn't know if she'd even be alive.

Billy gets out of his chair. Gets on his knees in front of her to hug her tight and drops of hot tears trickle down his bare skin. "Maybe someone's watching over you, Trish. Some force wanted you to be happy after all the shit you've been through. You deserve to be

happy.”

“God, you sound like Auntie Doris again.” Laughter through tears. Arms wrapping around his neck, her chin tucked over his shoulder.

“I wanna meet this chick real bad now.”

“You know what though?” She pulls back to look him straight on, suddenly grim. “It’s like there are *two* forces watching over me. This one force that keeps saving me, brings these opportunities and amazing people. Like you. And then there’s this other one, this competing force...a dark force. And it’s like that one wants me dead. Wanted me dead since birth.”

Billy’s face falls. “Baby, don’t say that shit.” He thumbs a stream of damp off her cheek. “Dont.”

“Sorry, but all this bad stuff that keeps happening? It’s always happened to me. It’s like being fucking haunted.”

“Well, I can promise you now. The force that keeps saving you, brings you good stuff? That’s the one that’s gonna win by a landslide.” He kisses her sweetly through salt water. “I’m gonna make sure of that.”

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks for reading. feel free to comment down below if anything tickles your fancy about this one. as usual, they keep me motivated.

22. gone hollywood

Notes for the Chapter:

it's FINALLY here. sorry this one took so long. I just hit this massive block due to the technical details of this chapter. This one's kind of a rough ride, so hang tight.

TW: cocaine use, descriptions of bulimia/vomit. Blood. Sexism galore.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" Amy asks, undoing her seatbelt.

Patricia leans forward to look out her car window, manicured red nails on the steering wheel. Watching the American flag whip in the breeze outside the front doors of the Los Angeles Police Department. Sun high over palm trees that tower over glittering glass and concrete. "I thought I did at first, but now that I'm here...I think I just want to do it alone."

"Okay, if that's what you want." Amy rubs Patricia's shoulder before reaching into her Armani bag to pull out a well-loved paperback. "I'll be fine here. I brought a book."

"*Women Who Love Too Much*," Patricia reads the title aloud. Doesn't like how it immediately makes her think of the absolute disaster that was dating Derek. "Something going on with you and your new boy?"

"Over now. He wasn't committed enough." Amy focuses on thumbing through the dog-eared pages. Orange and pink highlighter popping as she flips. Notes scrawled carefully in the margins. "You seriously need to read this, Pat. You'll realize that you just give and give and give, and they don't even think of you. They use you because you're so easy to manipulate. Addicted to pain. They don't care. That is, until you stop caring about *them*. Now that I broke it off with these last two guys, it's all "Oh Amy, I love you blah blah." Why didn't they care when I was actually dating them?"

Patricia tries to push Derek's pallid face from her mind. Queasy at how she's going to have to speak to some rigid cop about him today. "I thought you were always the eternal optimist."

Amy shakes her head. "Your whole situation with Derek, and then my stupid Bachelorette party is making me realize we were both selling ourselves short just to be with anyone at all. This book is making me realize that I need to just really focus on myself. Even take some time off work. Travel. Anything besides men for a while."

Patricia startles before beaming. "I love this new outlook, Amy. Fuck em'!" Patricia reaches out her hand for a high five. Amy slaps her palm back with a hearty laugh. "Fuck all those slimy fuck-faced bastards."

Amy nudges her. "Hey, you can totally borrow this when I'm done reading it. I think I'm going to give it to every woman I know."

Patricia turns to take her leather purse out of the backseat. "Pretty sure I'm on the other end of the spectrum right now." She nods towards Amy's open page. "Do they have a sequel to that? *Women Who Love Too Little*?"

Amy raises a brow. "Still feeling stingy, huh?"

Patricia takes a gold-plated lipstick and a black compact out of her bag. Gazes in the little mirror and applies a deep red as she frets. "After Derek it's like things have shifted inside of me." She accidentally goes too far over her lip-line, smudges it back with her index finger. "It's like pulling teeth to express myself. I'm all numb and fucked. And Billy's so..."

"Loving?"

Patricia's breath catches as she tilts the compact. Blue eyes appear, slightly bloodshot. Somehow not hers. "Yeah..."

"Do you feel the same way?"

"I feel all over the place." Patricia snaps the compact shut. "Derek made me realize that I didn't know what real love was to begin with. I just threw that term around way too easily. I felt so much, so

deeply, but maybe I would have felt that for any guy who paid attention to me.” She grimaces at her own ignorance, her baby-hearted delusion. “I know I care about Billy, but if I open that door, if I say it again...it has to be real this time. I can’t take the betrayal again. That level of hurt. I can’t.” She gives a harsh laugh, gesturing to the intimidating building next to them. “I mean, I’m parked outside the LAPD about to file a restraining order on the last guy I fell for. I’m not fucking ready.”

“You shouldn’t pressure yourself to feel anything, Pat.” Amy tuts, “And like me, you *did* date him really soon after the last one. Maybe he’s just a rebound?”

“No.” It comes out harsh before Patricia can measure the tone of it. She quickly smooths it down to something gentler. “No, I don’t think he is.”

“Me neither.” Amy grins. “Also, I think it was real gallant of him taking you in with all this Derek insanity. Ten points for Billy.”

“I know. Yet, the more he does for me, the more I feel like I’m this cold, psychotic bitch. For instance, I want to get out of his apartment as soon as possible, and he’s...taking it personally. But, I *told* him about how unready I am for this relationship from the beginning. How I need to take this slow. He shouldn’t be surprised at this point.”

“He’s been acting surprised?”

“Sometimes it’s like in one ear, out the other,” Patricia scoffs. Then wilts remembering how hot and cold Billy accused her of being. “I don’t think the way I’m acting is helping either though. I’m the fucking Queen of Mixed Signals. And it’s only because I really *am* that mixed up inside, but if I were dating me, I’d one hundred percent dump me. Kind of hate myself for it.”

“Don’t you dare hate yourself.” Amy scolds tenderly. “I think after this whole thing with Derek blows over, the Billy thing will be clearer. You’re just in the thick of the madness. Plus you’re still adjusting to your new job. And it’s a *crazy* job.”

“Tell me about it. Doesn’t feel real a lot of the time.” She hesitates

before asking the inevitable. "Have you watched the show?"

Amy hesitates too. "Uh-huh..."

"And? What do you think?"

"You look amazing!" Amy coos, though there's a shred of something hidden there. The same kind of reluctance Billy had when they watched her first show together. "Do you get to keep the outfits?"

"I don't know. Probably not." Patricia shrugs, chewing at her bottom lip. "That's all you have to say about it?"

Amy shifts, glancing away, looking out her car door as if to escape. "Oh you know me. I don't know anything about metal."

Patricia seeks her eyes, still looking anywhere but at her. "You can be honest with me, you know. I don't want any fake shit from you. We've always been real with each other."

"It's like you're trying to force a specific answer from me..."

"I'm not. It's just that everyone else I've asked *hates* it and you can't seem to look me straight in the eye right now, so I'm kind of doubting you at the moment."

Amy turns to her, her mouth opening and closing before she admits, "I'll be honest. It's not my thing."

"That's fine." Patricia lifts her chin high. Her heart stabbed through despite expecting that exact answer. She shouldn't have asked. "All I want is honesty."

Amy rushes to pacify her. "Please don't be sad! I don't get it, but I've never gotten the metal scene to begin with. It's all over my head." A touch to Patricia's arm to lessen the blow. "What does Billy think?"

She shrugs, imagines removing the blade from her chest. Wiping off the blood and moving on with the turn of her nose. Choosing to not care. "I'd call it *begrudging support*."

"It's probably because you look so good and he's jealous of all the

attention you're getting now!"

Patricia thinks of the floundering car dealer, the double-takes, and even pointing fingers she's received over the past few weeks. Leaving her feeling like a zoo-animal. Alienated. "It is a lot. Though, he hasn't really seen that many reactions yet."

"I'm sure he'll support whatever you do."

"I suppose so." Patricia stills. Remembers where they are. Her eyes linger on the front of the building again, stomach unsettled. Empty and gnawing. Anxiety buzzing in her belly, though she can't tell if it's from this meeting or skipping breakfast again. "Amy, what if the Derek thing isn't over any time soon?"

"We can't think that way, Pat." Amy reaches to put her arms tight around Patricia, keeps her in a mashing embrace. "Doesn't help to think that way."

"Still the eternal optimist after all." Patricia's voice gets muffled into Amy's hair.

Amy lifts back slightly, gives Patricia space to breathe. "I just have a strong hunch it'll be over soon. I can't see this continuing into 1988. My gut says it'll be over by New Years."

That's still months away. Not a totally pleasant prophecy, though she's grateful Amy can see an end at all.

All Patricia sees is lightless void.

She scans over Amy's concerned face. A soft jolt echoes in her heart. She shifts to press fresh lipstick into Amy's cheek. Leaves a crisp, red stain. "I love you. And I'm fucking glad you're here with me today. That's the only thing I'm certain of right now."

"I think you're the only one I'll let myself love too much." Amy leans on her shoulder, words tinged with something that Patricia finally realizes is fear. "That's why I need you to stay safe."

Patricia takes a seat, nervous as hell, trying not to fidget in the office the stern-mouthed secretary escorted her into. After a few minutes of waiting, she paws through the contents of her purse. Something to do with her hands besides wringing them. Tossing old gum wrappers in the tiny garbage bin next to her, reading through old notes she took for interviews back when she was writing her beloved zine.

She can't help but remember how simple, how inspired it all was before she got caught.

Seems like another life now.

Patricia peeks up at the clock to find fifteen minutes have already passed, hoping that self-help book is enough to hold Amy over. She eventually notices a framed photograph on the desk, angled slightly away from her. A young redhead girl. Looks about her age. Has a beautiful smile.

Finally the door opens. A stout man in dark green slacks and suspenders over his white button up shirt enters the room. Hard mouth. Hard eyes. The kind that have seen too much.

"Ms. Des Barres, is it?" He closes the door behind him, runs a hand through receding dark hair.

"Yes, that's me." Patricia gives a short smile, anxiety spiking.

"I'm Officer Holden." He sits down at his desk across from her. Grim as he organizes papers. Stacking them neatly as he glances up at her with that austere gaze. "What brings you here?"

Patricia adjusts the strap of her purse, shifts in her seat. Made vulnerable by the question already. "I want to file a restraining order?" She's not sure why it's easier to say it as a question instead of a direct statement.

There's a shadow that looms behind his eyes then. "Alright." He opens a drawer for a form. A pen. Clicks and tests the corner of the page for ink. It flows out red as blood so he switches to another. Black. "Describe the situation for me."

"I..." Her voice cracks so she swallows. Her tone coming out more

child-like than anticipated. That strength she so relies on now replaced by something quieter. Uncertain. "I broke up with my ex a few months ago. For cheating on me. A lot. And um. I had enough and broke it off. He hasn't...taken it too well."

A breath out. Pulse in overdrive. A realization that she's tucked her hair behind her ear about ten times in thirty seconds. That she's now pulling at her earring so hard it hurts.

Holden doesn't look up. "His name?"

"Derek." She releases her earring. Forces herself to sit up straighter, speak in a louder voice because this scared little girl act just won't do. Though saying her ex's name makes her nauseous, think of decapitated doll-heads. "Derek Valentine."

He scribbles that down. "Continue."

"About a month after the breakup he started showing up at my place uninvited, hanging out inside while I was at work. I told him to not come into my apartment anymore but he wouldn't listen. Kept trying to force himself into my life. He left hundreds of desperate messages on my answering machine. Really invasive. But at the time, it wasn't enough for me to freak out--"

"So when did you start freaking out?"

"When he came to my apartment while I was at a bachelorette party and trashed it." She watches Holden's pen move across paper. Her fingers squeezing the edge of her armrest as she recalls the past, a sudden anger in her now. "He spray painted "whore" and "slut" on all the walls. Pissed on my bed. Broke a window. I called the police and according to him they did go to his place to ask questions, but of course nothing happened."

Holden glances up, brows furrowed. "Why of course?"

"Because his Dad is some big-shot for the state-and *no offence* to the LAPD-the guy seems to have you all around his little finger." She leans forward, a touch spiteful now. "Derek's extremely charming when he wants to be. They didn't even take his prints. It's like he

smooth-talked the cops into thinking I did the whole damn thing by myself.”

She likes how those words all rolled out. Tougher, more in control. Less of a shaky pre-adolescent.

Holden pauses. “Well...that’s fucking terrible.”

“Yes.” Patricia’s brows raise, surprised he didn’t defend his fellow officers. “Yes it is.”

“I’ll make sure they swing by this Mr. Valentine again.” He nods to assure her. More scribbling. “I recognize the last name though. Son of Greg Valentine?”

“Yes. That’s him.”

A frown touches Holden’s lips. He sets down his pen to look her dead in the eye. “I’ll be honest with you, Ms. Des Barres. That man’s had his grubby fingers all over this station for the past ten years. I don’t have much seniority over him, but I can assure you, I don’t give a shit about any of those rich assholes. Keeping money in their pockets is all they care about. And they’re not above protecting their snot-nosed brats from their drug habits and all other sorts of nefarious activities.” A drained sigh as he rubs his temples. “It’s all too familiar-“ he stops himself. “Sorry, go on.”

She does, voice clear now, steady. “I changed the locks. So I thought that was the last of it, but apparently he had come by the apartment multiple times after that. Later, he paid me for the damages, so I felt like justice was served. Though even then when we met up so he could give me the money, he scared me. Scared the shit out of me actually.” She pauses. “He’s definitely one of those snot-nosed brats you were talking about. He’s gotten in trouble for drug stuff before, got off with nothing because of his Dad. He also has a really bad coke problem now and I’m pretty sure he’s dealing. Which seems like a bad idea. Never get high on your own stash, right?”

Holden just stares, arms crossed, waiting.

Patricia continues. “He just keeps getting more and more obsessive

and creepy. He always called me *doll* when we were dating. One time I came home and he had left a big bouquet of these really ugly roses outside my front door. Thorns still on the stems. There was a blonde dollhead inside the cellophane." She remembers the slowly blinking eyes as it rolled across the floor. "I think he was trying to send a message."

"So you feel that it's something more...sinister."

Patricia nods slowly. "Seems like it. And then not long after he somehow figured out where my boyfriend's band practice is. Showed up under the guise of being the lead singer's friend. I don't think it was an accident. Derek's not the type to make friends with anyone besides women, and apparently he's dealing cocaine to Nick now. The lead singer, I mean."

"*Dealing cocaine*," Holden repeats. Writes as he murmurs, "...and you believe he's actively following you. Tracking your movements."

"Yes, and he showed up to my apartment again a few days ago."

"While you were at home?"

"No. I was about to turn into the parking garage and saw his car outside."

Holden goes silent, contemplating for an agonizingly long moment before shifting forward in his seat. Elbows on the table. Hands in prayer. "I've seen this type of case a lot over the past few years. In fact, my daughter went through this exact same thing a year ago."

The redhead in the picture frame. The dusting of hair on Patricia's arms stands on end.

He looks pointedly at her. "I'm gonna ask you some questions and I need you to answer honestly. Not just for me, but for yourself."

"Ask away."

"First question." He begins to count on his fingers. "If you file the restraining order, you'll have to take him to court. Are you ready to face him in court?"

"I'm not sure." She hesitates. "His dad in the picture kind of makes me feel like my chances of winning are low."

"Second question. A restraining order takes a while to actually be confirmed. I can file a temporary order until then, but is time an issue for you?"

"Oh." She winces. "I never even thought about how long it would take."

"It could take several months, potentially longer."

She stiffens. "That's... discouraging"

"Lastly, and most very importantly." He leans towards her, voice going darker. "If the order actually gets put through, is Mr. Valentine the type to be riled up by that?"

Patricia licks nervously at her lips. "What do you mean?"

"Do you think he's the type to consider a restraining order a *challenge*? Do you think he's the type to get *violent*?"

Patricia remembers Billy's insistent concern for her physical safety. How the thought even crossed her mind that Derek might have a gun to kill them both that night outside of Cat's Eye's band practice. "... Maybe. He's never been violent with me, but I could see a potential there."

The deep-set lines in Holden's forehead bunch together. "The reason why I ask that last one- and I never would have asked that last question two years ago- is that my daughter filed an order against a man. I told her to file it. In fact, I *demand*ed it." His mouth tightens. "Within a month of the order going through she got...." He stops. Hard eyes flickering agony before freezing to black ice. "He killed her. The fucker killed her."

The words hit her like cannon fire. Render her speechless before she murmurs, "I'm sorry."

Her condolences bounce off him. He shakes his head as if to bat them away. "She's one of the many. There's lots of cases where this

happens. The stalker gets...incensed by his victim putting a barrier between them, even an invisible one. So if you feel like he's capable of escalating his behaviour, I insist-" he breathes out his nose. "Do *not* file the order."

She blinks. Still reeling from news of the tragic death of his daughter, dread gurgling up her esophagus. "But what about being safe?"

"A restraining order won't make you any safer. There's nothing truly protecting you. If anything happens you still have to call the police just like everybody else. It's a big waste of time if you ask me."

"So what am I supposed to do?" A frantic edge strains her words.

"Leave town."

Shock. Something helpless and strangled. "You're joking..."

Holden's voice lowers to an annoyed grunt. "This isn't something I would joke about."

"But I have a job here. I have friends here. A life." She narrows her eyes. "It's not that bad, is it? What I told you about him. I mean, he's never been physically violent with me. He hasn't hurt me yet-"

Yet. The word sears like a red-hot brand.

"Look, Ms. Des Barres." Holden leans back in his seat, looking unsympathetic. "You're free to do whatever the hell you want. You can file the order if that's easier. No one's stopping you."

"Well, I'm not going to do it *now*, obviously!" She can't contain the stress emanating out of her words, her eyes, her posture. Everything screaming *no*. "I just-" A hand flails out in frustration "-my options seem extremely limited right now."

"Can't say I like it either." Holden pauses for a moment, rubbing at his eyes. Clearly burnt out, exhausted to the core. "At the very least, move to another part of the city. Make sure he doesn't know where you live. Make it as difficult as possible for him to find you. Be invisible."

Patricia laughs, almost manic now. "I'm guessing you don't watch MTV?"

"Nope." Holden shrugs. "Never did like that trash."

"Well, I'm a host on it." She points to herself. "It's kind of hard to be invisible."

None of this fazes him. He takes his form and files it away. "Then *quit*. Get off it. Lay low. Don't risk your life just so you can be some stupid celebrity."

Unbelievable. Patricia taps her fingers on the armrest now, biting her tongue. Every part of her resisting, wanting to lash out.

She's had enough. "You do make it sound oh-so easy, Officer," she nearly hisses as she gets up from her chair. "Thank you for your assistance." She opens the door. Then pauses, fingers on the handle. Empathy overtaking her frustration as she turns to face him. "I'm sorry for your loss."

He stays stone-faced. A curt nod before looking away.

Patricia shuts the door behind her, close to screaming. Exits the building, stopping outside the doors to find the American flag still waving in the cloudless sky, promising freedoms that don't quite seem to ever fully arrive.

She's not sure she believes in those promises anymore, that she ever did. All that's guaranteed in this city is the glamour of white powder. The glint of a needle. Blood, sex, fallen bodies. Garbage rotting under the scent of orange blossoms, and the deadly siren's call of the Sunset Strip.

*

After another work day of fake smiles, cleavage for days, and increasingly intolerable questions, Barry invites Patricia out for dinner to meet her future co-host for Live Wire's much-anticipated Halloween special. He takes her to *Air*, a restaurant for the rock n' roll elite of Hollywood. White teeth shining in dim light, loud music, disgustingly high prices, overflowing champagne flutes, not so

discreet fondling under tables. Whispers of sex in the downstairs lounge. A place she's heard of but never imagined she'd step foot in.

Barry's entourage is here too. All men -most with silent, beautiful models on their arms- *including* the same man that felt compelled to tell her she had "just a bit of tummy" to get rid of.

It's gone now.

Conversation makes its way around the dark booth and to her own dismay, she finds herself playing the same role she's been perfecting on television. Emulating the dumb blonde because they don't seem to like her resting scowl. Laughing at nothing. That smile strained and on the verge of cracking her entire face when inside all she can think of is how utterly fucked her life is, how she did the supposedly right thing and now her only options are to either abandon her entire livelihood or stay in the eye of the storm.

When food is served, she realizes why the restaurant is called Air. The portions are nearly invisible. So light they could float away.

Perfect. Barry seems to be in on her dietary plan. She prods at a single piece of shellfish with her fork, the flesh artfully drizzled with blood-red liquid. Tries not to dwell on eating it in front of the same man who pinched her stomach.

Drinks get topped up and the conversation gets more insular. Revolves around business and women's bodies. Nobody speaks to her except Barry with a schmoozing: *more champagne?* Patricia eyes the bathrooms, grateful that she's seated at the edge of the rounded booth. Able to easily escape if she needs to hide in a stall. Get away from this men's circlejerk.

Then to her shock, Jon Bon Jovi slides into the booth next to her, forcing her to scoot over.

"Ah! There he is," Barry says as Patricia blinks in confusion, squished into her boss's shoulder. He raises his champagne flute in greeting, then nudges her. "Ms. Des Barres, meet your co-host. I'm sure you recognize him."

Jon reaches to shake her hand, hair coiffed to perfection. Small build. That thousand watt smile nearly blinding her. "Big fan of your show, Pamela. Think it might be my favourite thing on MTV right now."

"Patricia," she corrects as she tries to create a gap between her and Barry. Shooting judgemental eyes towards Jon at that slip of her name. Plus, that *smile* of his. Takes up his whole head.

"Right, right." Jon glances at Barry. "So spill the deets, Moore. And make it quick. I'm supposed to be at another table tonight." He points to a large booth across the restaurant, where she recognizes the rest of the band, plus a bevy of shriek-laughing groupies.

"I believe we were set for an hour long meeting?" Barry looks only slightly disgruntled, though from the flare in his eyes Patricia bets he's furious. Not one to be crossed.

"Yeah, that's not happening." Jon smiles the smile of an ego-bloated rock star used to getting his way. Thinks he's so cute.

"Ever the busy man, are we?" Barry tilts his head, voice cutting. Lighting a cigar before going into the procedure for the night, grey-white smoke billowing from his nostrils, contrasting his black suit. Mafia kingpin in a film noir.

Jon was right in not needing to hang around. It takes only minutes to receive the whole schedule. They'll take turns introducing bands. At times they'll introduce bands together, flirtatious banter absolutely required. Barry recommends Jon put his arm around her at some point. The audience will love it, you see. Patricia covers her mouth at that last input, suppressing a horrified laugh.

Billy's going to *die*.

As if her smile is a call to action, Jon looks her up and down with overconfident familiarity. That's when Patricia braces herself for oncoming bullshit. She's been around enough of these guys to know when she's about to receive someone's unwarranted commentary.

"So, Paula—"

Her fists clench. "*Patricia*."

A lazy chuckle. Unbothered. "Fuck, sorry. God, you just have one of those names, you know?" He leans closer. "Couldn't help but notice you're a bit more clothed tonight."

She's getting way too good at judging these assholes. "Very perceptive, Jon."

An arm slithers to rest behind her seat. "So tell me, do you wear those sexy little outfits just on TV or...do you like to wear them for someone special if he asks right? Maybe something even littler?"

"I like to wear them for *me*, thanks." Not true. She'd never squeeze into one of those latex vices on her own. "But my boyfriend likes them too."

Over the years she's learned to mention her boyfriend as soon as possible, even when she didn't have a boyfriend. Though for the persistent, womanizing types, this won't matter one bit. It might even turn them on.

Jon shakes his head with a click of his tongue, only gets closer. "Dang, shoulda known you were already taken. Who is he? Must be some big star."

"I'm curious as well, Patricia." Barry cuts in, currently scrawling notes in an open folder. "You don't speak of him much."

She's never felt more put on the spot. Pinched between these two smooth-talkers, she gazes across the table to see one of the men whisper in a lithe model's ear, something that makes the girl tense up. Look away. Uncomfortable as she is. "His name's Billy. He's a drummer for a really amazing band, Cat's Eye. Maybe not super famous, but definitely famous on the Strip."

"Never heard of them," Jon smirks.

"Weren't they playing the night we met?" Barry asks. Patricia nods in turn. "I might have even signed them if they were a bit more straight-laced. It's a real shame about their lead singer, isn't it? Poor guy can barely stand upright offstage."

"They're...working on that." Patricia says weakly.

"They still put on fantastic live show but their backstage rep does proceed them." Barry muses. "No one's going to sign that after having to deal with Motley Crüe for nearly a decade. Better to avoid the disaster before it begins. Right, Jon?"

"Sure," Jon sniffs, gaze still on her. It's then that she notices the white dusting around his nose. "Well, Blondie." He skirts around saying her name. "It sure was nice meeting you." He reaches across to steal Barry's pen, proceeds to write down his number on a napkin. Slides it towards her. "If you ever get tired of that nobody..." A flash of white teeth before he saunters back to his cackling groupies.

"Now you two sure would make an interesting couple." Barry says crisply. "Though, I think you're too bright for his kind."

"To put it lightly." Patricia crumples the napkin up into a ball, tempted to light it on fire. "Also I think I'm two heads taller than him." She glugs down more champagne, fully aware she's racing to numb herself but choosing to ignore it.

Barry notices too. Mouth twitching. "Need something to take the edge off that encounter?" He reaches in his jacket to pull out a baggie of white powder.

Patricia's heart drops. Stunned for a moment before she tells herself this is normal here. That she should be used to it by now. This is Hollywood, after all. "Uh...doesn't that stuff usually *increase* one's edge?"

"A wonderful point." Barry unloads a small pile of cocaine on the glass table. "Though I think a bump would make the night go far more smoothly."

"What happened to your lecture about the lead singer of my boyfriend's band? A bit hypocritical, don't you think?"

"Ah, but everything in moderation is key, isn't it?" Barry rustles in his pocket for a rolled up bill. "You see, unlike that spiralling addict, I don't need to take it. I *choose* to. It's harmless, really. No more dangerous than a cup of coffee. You drink coffee, don't you?"

“Yeah.” Patricia watches as Barry forms a thick line with a gold credit card. Feels like she’s watching Derek all over again “I’ve just known way too many people who’ve lost control with that stuff. I’ve seen lives go down the drain.”

“That’s a reflection of them, not the substance.” Barry snorts the whole line off the table with clean efficiency. “I’ve been partaking in this ritual for a decade. *I* rule the substance, it does not rule me.”

“Amazing. If only everyone had your tremendous self control,” Patricia says with acid flair.

“A bit touchy tonight, Patricia?” He shoots her a half-grin.

“I’m not-”

He cocks his chin at her. “Then have some.”

“No thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” Barry sniffs more powder. Then offers the next line to the MTV exec beside him. “It’s quite good, Evan. Hits hard.”

Patricia watches, blank-faced. Stomach muscles tightening as the cocaine circles around the table, no one declining besides her. Seeing how left out she is, Barry reaches for the champagne sitting in the ice bucket next to him. Pops off the cork. Places the bottle in front of her.

She takes the bait and tops up her glass. For every line sniffed, she sips back more wine. By the time they’re done inhaling, she’s gone through two more glasses.

Buzzing, Barry leans closer to a woozy Patricia, now sinking into her seat, the mechanical drumbeat of Def Leppard from restaurant speakers keeping her lucid. “I have a proposition,” he sniffs. “About your boyfriend. Billy. I want to help him.”

That makes her perk up. A record deal, maybe? “How?”

“I want Cat’s Eye to perform on our Halloween special,” he says. “I’d greatly enjoy giving your dear Billy a leg up in this industry.”

Patricia sets her wine glass down. “Seriously? You’d really do that?”

“Yes. Though there is one condition.”

Seems there’s always a condition or two.

Barry fiddles inside his folder. Pulls out a magazine that makes her stop breathing. Pornography. Of the BDSM variety. Shades of black and red.

“I want you to wear *this* for your next interview.” He opens the magazine to the centerfold.

Patricia analyzes the outfit, the model, a strange paralysis in her limbs at the sight. A blonde, busty woman on all fours, black ball-gag in her mouth. Black leather bikini bottoms with black tape in X’s over her nipples. Dead-eyed, somewhere else. Just like her right now.

“That’s pretty fucking obscene, Barry.” She chugs back even more wine, an insatiable need to disappear, not sure if that sick feeling is from the thought of Barry looking at that gagged woman and thinking of her or drinking on an empty stomach.

“I know it’s a lot but I really think our viewers would enjoy it.” Barry insists. “Of course, you’d only wear what’s neck down. Still need to speak after all. Though I bet the majority wouldn’t care if you spoke or not.” He breaks into a dry laugh, eyes watching as if expecting her to join him.

Patricia just stares at the glossy centrefold with numb focus, losing grip on the moment, reality slipping. “Fine, whatever.” She shrugs the whole thing off, now too drunk to protest. Too confused. Decides it’s all worth it if Billy gets that leg up Barry is promising. “That’s why you pay me the big bucks, right?” She erupts into laughter then, something hysterical in it. Reminds her of the hyenas at Bon Jovi’s table.

Maybe those girls don’t find the members of Bon Jovi all that funny. Maybe they’re all just wasted.

“Exactly,” Barry beams, gesturing to their waiter for more booze before covering Patricia’s knee with his hand. A short squeeze.

Thumb stroking. “And you deserve every single penny, don’t you, my dear?”

*

To her surprise, Barry doesn’t try to sleep with her that night. Instead, he calls her a cab. She gets dropped off right in front of her apartment.

It’s only when she’s in the elevator, fishing in her purse for her keys, that she realizes she’s supposed to be staying at Billy’s. The elevator opens. She stumbles out into the hallway, fingers skimming the wall for balance. Still feeling Barry’s hand on her leg, a pit of disgust in her stomach.

Why in the fuck does she keep ending up in these situations?

Then she remembers Derek’s little visit. She imagines her apartment door wide open. The entire place destroyed again. Or maybe he’s waiting for her there now. Ready to do god knows what.

The photograph of Officer Holden’s daughter flits through her mind. She pats her jacket for her pocket-knife.

No. Wait. She’s not wearing a jacket. She left it at Billy’s.

She wouldn’t be able to run without falling. She’s in stilettos. Can’t take a step without the hall twirling under her feet. She stops there and takes her shoes off. Carries them under one arm. Tests the heel against her fingers for sharpness. Hopes it’s an effective weapon.

She finally arrives at her door. Closed. Normal. Nothing scary. She unlocks the door and almost trips over a short stack of glossy poster paper.

There she is. Stolen off the Sunset Strip. Lady in Red. Headless. The poster curled over her face so that she’s just a body. She gets on her knees to smooth the paper flat. Then freezes.

Her eyes are blacked out. Her mouth too. A strip of darkness over her lips. Silenced. A thought bubble coming out of her head that says *I’m prettier when I don’t talk. All disgusting sluts are.*

She tears the paper in half. Finds another one underneath it with the same aesthetic. Blacked out eyes. Blacked out mouth. But the words are more manic underneath. Giant letters that cover the entire red poster. *HOLLYWOOD'S BIGGEST SLUT*. Another one under it. *FUCKDOLL*. Then another. *SHUT UP WHORE*.

On the last poster she feels a blot of something dried where her mouth is. Blended into dark red. Something thick, blackish, crackling. Is it paint?

Blood.

She chokes on a wail rising up her throat. Curls up on the floor next to the posters. Slams the front door shut with her bare foot, stilettos next to her head, the apartment whirling around her, head pounding. Blending, blurring into the floor for what feels like an eternity.

It's too much, that void in her opening up. Ravenous. She sits up sniffing to lurch on hands and knees towards the kitchen. Swaying with each movement. Opens the cupboards and stares dully for a moment before she grabs every desirable food item she can get her hands on. Piles the mass in her arms and sets it on the kitchen floor.

She starts off with an unopened box of chocolate chip cookies. Eats the entire box. Moves onto potato chips. Eats the entire bag. Opens the fridge. Devours pickles. Cheese. Strawberry yogurt. Ham. Followed by all the chocolate milk. Barely chews, swallows without tasting.

None of it sits well. Not that it matters because she wasn't going to let it sit there long anyways.

She crawls to the bathroom, heaves her elbows onto the toilet seat. Pushes two fingers down her throat and spews it all into porcelain. Rests her head there, relieved.

Done. All better now.

The next morning Patricia wakes up on the bathroom tile. That afternoon, she makes an appointment to view the apartment with the gym in the building.

She moves in three days later.

Notes for the Chapter:

Apologies to all Jon Bon Jovi fans and thanks to all of those still hanging out with me. i know this story just gets darker and darker so those who continue are my homies, and i love youuuu <3 we're gonna be wildin' for the next two chapters so...yeah.

23. babylon

Notes for the Chapter:

this chapter is kinda nuts and probably too much as usual, but bear with me.

tw: SMUT, blood, mentions of bulimia, homophobia, trish being frustrating and frustrated, billy being a simp but i am HERE for it

i am so sleep deprived and this chapter is so long. please take this humble offering. it's all i have.

Patricia lays back flat on her brand-new couch, one leg hauled over the strong slope of Billy's shoulder. His hips rutting with intense focus.

"Right there," she hisses. Moans competing with the sinful sound of their bodies meeting. "I'm...so...close."

Billy pistons deeper. Thumb resting on her clit, the tight movement of his hips causing a natural friction. "Little fucking slut for me, aren't you?" Tone husky, sharp. Never breaking eye contact. A hint of a leer on his lips, this being their usual exchange of filth. Guaranteed to make her react with gasps and helpless twitches. Provoking her into explosive arousal.

Her breath does catch, but this time with conflicting sensations. A harsh burst of heat that envelops, swallows, snakes up her spine. Followed by a churning, almost pained sensation in her solar plexus.

Posters slipped under her door. Her image vandalized. Features blacked out. *Slut. Whore. Bitch.* Faceless. Just a body. Disposable deposits of fat and flesh and skin. An object to fuck and use. Worship and hate.

"Come on, princess" Billy stops all movement. An intentionally frustrating pause as he taunts. Hovering over her, breathing ragged. "Who are you a little slut for?"

Patricia takes a moment to centre herself, then cups his face with both hands. Expression gentle but serious. "Please don't call me that tonight."

Billy's brows crease, surprised. "Shit, thought you liked that nasty stuff." He kisses her slow in apology. "Sorry."

"I *do* usually," she murmurs. "I'm just in the mood to be called..." She gets a lump in her throat, never asked this before. "-sweet things right now?" She flushes horribly then. Such a girlish, petulant request, shameful even. Praise me. Care for me. Adore me.

Sweet. Powdery icing sugar. Soft as the pink blush of rose petals. Obscene in its self indulgence.

No. Not a norm for her to ask for that. All her adult life she's asked for the base, the primal, the shocking and even degrading.

Hurt me so good. Her default mode. Turns her on, makes her come. Doesn't always nourish.

Billy just smiles slowly, eyes lighting up. Devious because he has no issue being as saccharine as he is profane. "Oh, I can be sweet if you want me to, beautiful girl. The most beautiful girl in the whole damn world." He continues his thrusts, slow now, eyes heating up as he smirks. "Better? You like that?"

"Yes." She's blushing hard now, not sure why she's more humiliated by asking for this kindness than for a mean fuck. It's not that he's never been this mushy with her before, it's more that she's close to begging him for it. Never been more starved for this kind of soothing, tooth-rotting affection.

His hot palm smooths tendrils of hair from her forehead. "Goddess. Queen. My Aphrodite." Honey in every syllable. Simple in its honesty. No shame in its corniness. "I wanna play with you all fucking night, gorgeous." Sugary sweet kisses get sewn into her damp brow, her temple.

She gasps, tingles everywhere. The gentle brush of his mouth sending fierce bursts of pleasure to every inch of flesh, blood, and bone.

Warms where she never knew she was cold. The most electric reaction she's ever had to delicate pressure, gentle tones. A breathless whine rushes from her lips, embarrassing so she suffocates it as soon as it escapes. Covers it with salt.

"Cheesy as-" She can't get the word out because he's kissing her into the cushions. Tongue gliding silky-smooth against hers. Pleasure deepening as he slants his thrusts, hits that spot. Bronze skin flushed as much as she is. Burning for her.

"You love cheesy," he purrs against her skin. As if in emphasis the obscene sound of him pumping in her gets sloppier, nastier. "That what's getting you so wet, baby? What's turning you on so much?"

"You," She surrenders to feeling then, pulling at his shoulders, tugging at the roots of his hair. Wild. "You. Please, baby."

He groans hearing that last word, rasping under his breath at the sheer newness of it. "Yeah, call me that. Turns me on so much. Jesus, that gets me hot..." He shifts suddenly. Flips her so she's on her side underneath him, both her legs dangling over the couch cushions. A light yet shocking smack lands where her thigh meets her bottom. Making her shiver as he enters her again slowly, staying close, limbs twined. Their noses brushing, lips grazing as he fucks her with sharper force. His hand delves between her sticky inner thighs, smearing slick over her aching little bud.

"Are you my girl?" Billy mutters, never letting up on pace or pressure. She marvels through her thrall at his potent movements. His passion for her, want pouring off him. "You're my girl aren't you, sweetheart? Say it."

Knowing she's utterly desired. Craved. Needed. The healing nectar of it. The feeling of wanting him back just as much. It's never felt as good as it does now.

"I'm your...girl." She unravels into an orgasm mid-sentence. Sounds absolutely frantic, "Oh my god. I'm yours." Gossamer sensation that unfolds like a pink rose, sparkling, opening petal by petal in fast succession.

"*That's it, baby.*" His movements get more raw, jagged, completely absorbed in her ecstasy. All his focus on her moaning, pulsating body, her legs jerking. "Look at you, coming so pretty for me."

Then the final wave settles. Finished. Her skin shining with sweat as her chest heaves. Satisfied to the marrow. A shameless, spent groan bubbling out her lips.

Billy pulls out with a hot, gruff sound, hand fisting over his slippery cock. spurts of his come oozing down her hip and thigh before he leans to give her a long, luscious kiss. Humming ecstasy against her mouth. Little sounds of relief and pleasure mingling between them.

She reaches for the box of tissues on her new cream-white marble coffee table. Billy takes a square. Wipes down the mess while she takes a moment to absorb their surroundings through sex haze. Still adjusting. To the present. To her new life, new *everything*.

"You're fucking amazing." Billy hauls her in his arms so that she's settled on his bare lap for more soft kisses. After their heart rates have steadied he pulls back with a sigh, looking around her shiny apartment in contentment. The sleek lines. The washed-out pinks against white carpeting. Art Nouveau and framed Kahlos blending with prints of all her favourite metal bands. Classy and grungy all at once.

Something that finally screams *Patricia*.

"This might be the fanciest place I've ever had sex in." He feels up her breast, brings it to his mouth. A small shock of sensation when he kisses her nipple, nips the peak. "I'm liking it a lot so far."

Patricia only offers a dazed grin. Too melted to respond. She pushes off him to stand upright, taking a few attempts because he won't let her go. Wrestling out of his arms, giggling. She manages to escape with a light shove, soles planting on fluffy carpet.

Too fast. She immediately gets stars behind her eyes. Sways on feet she can't feel.

"Woah." Billy grabs her arm to steady her. "Careful."

Patricia clutches his shoulder for a moment. Blinking the dancing spots away.

“You alright?” Billy asks, still holding on.

“I’m fine,” she says tightly. The reality of her bad eating habits springing to the surface now with a blast of guilt. “Just got fucked real good.” She smiles back at him, shrugs it all off. Highly aware the real reason is from not being able to stop purging since she moved in. Alone again.

Years of therapy all down the drain. Everything gone completely out of control, and she won’t tell him a damn thing.

He sniffs out her poor excuse anyways. “You seem kinda out of it lately. Like you’re starting to get sick or something.”

Limbs go taut at how near to being on the nose he is. Edging her secret.

“Do I?” She had forced down some fruit and a handful of almonds before he had arrived but evidently it wasn’t enough to balance her.

“Yeah.” He scans her with eyes that see more than she’d like. Too prying. “Have you been sleeping enough?”

Maybe he *can* see everything. Maybe he would have outright asked about what she ate today if she hadn’t had a giant meltdown about food in front of him already. Maybe he’s stepping on eggshells right now, trying to coax it out of her.

She can’t bear the tension.

“I could probably use some more z’s,” she says, tone light. Keeping things breezy despite her increasing paranoia. “Just stressed. Big move and all.”

Shaken at his commentary on her failing health, Patricia leaves the living room just then, escapes to her bedroom; a massive space with a big, round bed. Dusky velvet-pink blankets. Big potted Monsteras glinting their leaves. A fantastic view of the L.A skyline. She clicks on her clock radio to fuzz out her thoughts, only to hear *she’s got the*

devil in her heart. A moment of letting those lyrics burn before numbing them out. Just like everything else.

She opens large white closet doors. Slips into jeans and a simple black tank top, her attire for a night out on The Strip. Tonight's not about her or appearances for once and she wants to keep it that way.

"Hm, you look really sexy," Billy mutters lazily when she returns. Interrogation forgotten. Lounging in bare skin, arms sprawled. A golden god on display. She picks his jeans up off the floor as his gaze lingers at her breasts. A sharp toss and heavy fabric hits his face with a loud thwack. "*Ugh.* Jesus, Trish."

"I picked this one out to be boring." She turns on her heel and scrutinizes herself in the full length mirror by the front entrance. "I don't want to be recognized so I'm sacrificing looks for anonymity."

"You could never be boring," Billy sinks deeper into the cushions, still blissfully naked. Jeans now askew at the other end of her couch. "And whether people recognize you or not, you look beautiful in simple stuff too. Don't have to be glamorous all the time." He peeks at the nearest clock. "Speaking of which, isn't your show about to come on in a minute?"

She freezes. A terrible sinking in her empty, fluttering stomach. "We don't have to watch that."

"Why not? We've got like an hour before we have to leave."

She quickly remembers the shoot for this latest episode. How she had an interview at The Whiskey with some up and coming bands. Barry and his entourage standing around to loom as she teetered out in 6 inch stilettos, nipple pasties, black leather panties. Felt even more degrading than it looked on paper. She's not sure why she bothered hoping it wouldn't.

It took her two shots of vodka beforehand just to get the courage to do it.

"You look positively edible," Barry had said, unable to resist giving her a lingering once-over before guiding her by the waist to meet the

bands. Standing beside the cameraman to watch the entire thing with a near-gloating smile. Observing her with excruciating attention as she sat on the couch interviewing rockstar musicians that were partly laughing at her the entire time.

Just another big dumb slut to them, with even dumber, sluttier questions.

A break afterwards. Then more booze, given to her for free by The Whiskey staff. How kind of them.

When she came out for her second interview she was plastered, empty stomach striking again. They filmed anyways. She can barely remember what the questions were, but she remembers Barry liking it, not minding at all. In fact, he may have even encouraged her, if her memories of his hand on her lower back leading her towards the bar mean anything. It's all a bit fuzzy now.

And incredibly shameful. Beyond embarrassing. Great sex only momentarily numbing the deepest regret. She's far too easily influenced. Where the hell is her *spine*? Didn't she used to have one?

Thankfully, she's always been a well-spoken drunk. A flashback to her rowdy college days, returning hammered to her shared apartment with Amy. Plunking down on the couch and having long, drawn out conversations with her that she couldn't remember upon waking. Half the time Amy couldn't tell she was wasted until she stood up and walked right into a wall.

She prays that the latter never happened on Live Wire. Surely they would tell her? At least edit it so she appeared lucid? All her calls to Barry to sort this out went straight to his secretary.

Back to present now, her skin going deep red at Billy's questioning eyes. "Um. I just don't like us watching it together. Or myself at all really. It's just awkward."

"That's fine, I guess." Billy peers at her with concern until she looks away. "But how are you liking it so far? You never really say anything about it."

"I don't want to talk about it right now." A snap from her lips, whipping out mean.

"Jeez, no need to get snarky, babe," Billy grates. "Was just wondering." He pauses for a long moment because she doesn't respond. Her face still towards the mirror because she can't stand to look at him. Thankfully he changes subjects, doesn't delve deeper. "I'm still stoked we're gonna be on TV together in a week. That the whole fucking world—"

"Just North America, actually." That same sharp tone garners a raise of Billy's brow in the mirror.

She's irritating him.

She doesn't like how she's behaving either. Doesn't like who she's becoming. This starved, paranoid bitch, control of her life slipping through her hands. Reality becoming more and more surreal, ephemeral.

"Right," he says. "*All* of North America is gonna be watching. Pretty crazy."

She smears on a thick coat of red lipstick, her one hint of glamour tonight, smacking lips at her reflection. Nervous because she hasn't told him about Jon Bon Jovi co-hosting yet. Doesn't want to ruin his excitement, or for him whine to her about it the entire week. He's gonna be peeved either way so she'd rather it be a short burst.

"I really gotta thank this Bailey guy," Billy continues, still trying to make conversation.

"Barry." What is it with men and names?

"Whatever. He's fucking awesome for giving us this shot." Billy shuffles off the couch. Pulls on tight jeans with a few hops. Patricia spares a glance to appreciate muscles rippling as he yanks an equally tight gray shirt over his head, *Barbarian Days* in black font written across the chest. "I can only go out for an hour or so tonight, by the way. Gotta head to practice." He gives her hopeful eyes. "You wanna watch us again?"

“No, that’s okay.”

“Yeah, I get it if you don’t,” he shrugs. “After...last time.”

“It’s not that,” she admits. “I just want to see Agora’s whole set. I haven’t been out for fun in a while.” At least that’s true.

Billy nods, stepping toward her. Turning her around for a wordless bear hug. Catches her off guard because if she were him, she’d be out the door by now. No doubt about it. *Bye, bitch.* She can see him leaving already.

But no, he’s somehow affectionate despite this no-man’s land between them. Undeserved kindness, in her opinion. The warmth of his body seeping through her clothes, butterflies exploding when he lifts her off the floor to give her a quick kiss. Setting her back down with a grin.

It might be undeserved but it sure smooths things over.

*

The night crackles. A buzz too high for a Sunday night when they arrive at The Shooting Star. The opening act playing a set that illicit screams, beer cans thrown, girls flashing their goods.

A normal night on The Strip, really. What catches Patricia off guard is the amount of eyes on her. Men and women doing double-takes, some in simple recognition, others wide-eyed and whispering to each other. Seems like dressing down for this occasion didn’t help.

When they make a pitstop at the bar, two blondes she recognizes from that wild night at the Whiskey come up to her. The same ones that were mauling Billy, wanted his name branded on their skin.

“Oh my *god*, I love you,” one of the blondes slurs, clutching at her arm, red talons digging. “Your show is my *life*.” She presses a marker into Patricia’s palm while pulling down the collar of her dress precariously low, a wordless request to get her cleavage signed.

Patricia gulps at the unexpected clamouring, stunned for a second before realizing this is a moment of victory. She shoots Billy a

triumphant look over her shoulder before she scrawls her signature over jiggling flesh. The girl squeals, kisses Patricia's cheek with wet lips before stumbling away with her golden friend, neither sparing Billy a glance.

A dumbfounded look emerges on his face, emanates rejection. "What the fuck was that?"

"*Jealous?*" Patricia beams, mirthful. Can't keep herself from gloating.

"They didn't even *look* at me and I was standing right next to you." Billy frowns, then catches himself. Arms folding defensively. "Not that I want them to look..."

Patricia's eyes roll, head tilting back with laughter at his proud peacock feathers wilting. "Do you have a problem with a woman admiring another woman?"

"No, I just can't believe a chick would want another chick to sign their tits." He pauses. "Maybe they're lesbians?"

"Yes. Any girl who doesn't pay attention to you must be a lesbian."

"I won't disagree with that," he chuckles. "And hey, the world could always use more lesbians."

"I can't tell if that's really progressive of you or if you're just being perverted as usual."

"I can't either." He drapes an arm over her shoulders, leaning close to mutter. "But I bet that chick would slip you some tongue if you asked real nicely." A devious smirk. "I wouldn't mind finding out."

She elbows his ribs. "Can you not be a lech for five seconds, please?"

"I'm constantly holding back as it is." He wraps both arms around her waist, plants a kiss on her neck. "You don't even wanna know what I *don't* say. Think you'd slap me."

"Wow, you have the self control of a saint," she snorts, unimpressed.

"I deserve more recognition for it, to be honest."

The night goes on and Patricia continues to get center stage. The lead singer of Agora announcing to the crowd that he's honoured that *the blonde babe from MTV is here, where is she?* The whole crowd looking for a specific face, a bright pink spotlight circling the masses. Loud screams of approval when the light finally settles on her.

She sinks deeper into Billy's arms, embarrassed yet flattered. Not sure whether she wants to curl up and disappear or soak it all in. The Hermit and The Star duking it out inside her. Billy looking just as confused.

An hour passes. Billy kisses Patricia goodbye, a reluctant motion. "You sure you don't want to come with?"

The blonde girls wave at her from across the venue, tittering with giggles.

The Star wins out. She waves back, fingers wiggling flirtatiously just to get a rise out of Billy. "And miss out on all the tit-signing action? I think not."

"I'll miss you." A sloppier kiss, possessive. Lots of tongue. An ass grab that leaves no room for anyone to doubt she's taken before he glances towards the blondes. "And if anything happens with those two, be sure to take pics." That same devious grin returns, hoping to provoke a reaction as well.

She musses up his hair in response, makes him pout.

After Billy's departure, Patricia enjoys the show, not minding being alone, dancing alone, though she's never felt so watched.

It's not that bad, though. She might even like these eyes on her. The energy being congratulatory, attention mostly from other women. No men have talked to her yet, but plenty of female metal-heads seem to be taken with her tonight, with their ripped up tight jeans, their teased hair and brutal sex appeal. One tattooed girl in particular telling her that she's a source of inspiration for other women on The Strip, that she has been for years.

It touches her deeply, this unexpected bonding. Numbers get

exchanged. A promise to meet up again for drinks. A rare thing for her, usually estranged from other women besides Amy.

The wee hours of Monday morning arrive, the numbers in the club dwindling. Patricia decides to end the night, exhausted. Billy had driven her here so she walks down the street to catch a cab, night air full of fog and fumes. The pavement desolate besides the odd stumbling pedestrian, the cracked out addict. Not her favorite time of the night.

She reaches in her pocket to find that she planned poorly yet again, her pocket knife in her leather coat, not the the jean jacket she's currently wearing.

The closest payphone is out of service, so she walks another block, grateful she's wearing sturdy boots tonight and not super high heels, the clicking sound one of the few that fill the cool night air.

Then she hears a voice that makes her jump: "Hey! It's you! The Whore of fucking Babylon!"

She snaps a look over her shoulder, hair on end. Sees a classic metalhead emerge from the shadows. Slayer shirt. Long lank hair past his shoulders, eyes that disappear into the night. Drunk or high, she can't tell.

And worse yet, he's *gigantic*. At least six foot five. Heavy-set. Hulking. Just her luck that this weirdo be massive.

She turns without a reaction. Keeps walking. Heels clipping faster.

"You walking away from me, whore?" A voice like acid before he switches tones. Begins to preach, high and mighty: "So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness, and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy! Having seven heads and ten horns..."

Fear engulfs her. Anyone quoting the bible on The Strip at two in the morning *cannot* be sane. Calling her a whore and following her sure doesn't ease her fears either. She chides herself again for forgetting her knife. For not leaving with Billy. Poor life choices at every turn

these days.

“...decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and *filthiness* of her fornication..”

There’s a good ten feet between them but this street never seems to end and there’s no one else in sight now. If this was last night, the weekend hordes would still be raving, but no, she had to go out on a Sunday when the streets are deserted.

So stupid. Why is she always so stupid?

“Don’t you fucking walk away from me, whore!” the man hisses behind her, continues frothing at the mouth. “And upon her forehead was a name written: Mystery! Babylon The Great! The mother of harlots and the abominations of earth!”

She’s so scared she can barely breathe, let alone speak. Not sure whether to engage with him or not. Unfortunately, he doesn’t give her a choice because a second later he’s grabbing her wrist.

“Slut!”

“Let me fucking go!” Instinct kicks in. She punches him upside the mouth. His lip splits open, bursts dark blood, sends him back in shock. Thank god for those blasphemous precious stones adorning her knuckles.

Right as she’s about to run, she sees unexpected salvation: Dave exiting the nearest 7/11, grocery bags in hand. A fucking angel.

“Dave!” She rushes over to him, flooded with relief.

“Trish?” He looks behind her at the bleeding man.

“He’s fucking following me!” She grips his shoulder, thanking the universe for her sudden fortune.

“Hey, are you bothering my friend here, buddy?” Dave keeps Patricia close, though she can see he’s freaked out as she is. Scanning nervously over this guy’s towering height.

The metalhead stares them down, furious, dripping crimson drool. Bloodshot eyes spotting the hot pink t-shirt Dave is wearing, the Queen logo, Freddie Mercury's face adorning the fabric. "Would you look at this shit!" He explodes into the ugliest laugh. "The whore and the fag! Both of you belong in hell, scum of the earth. Bringing Satan into the world, poisoning us all."

"Says the guy wearing the *Slayer* shirt!" Patricia seethes, knowing every other song they play is about summoning Satan. "You're fucking insane!"

"Uh, don't think this is the kinda guy you want to antagonize, Trish." Dave says under his breath, nervously adjusting the grocery bags in his arms. Backing up a step, gawking, as the bully steps closer. "Let's just go—"

"You looking at me, faggot?" The metalhead bends, grabs at Dave's shirt with a meaty fist. "You wanna fuck me up the ass? Sodomize me?"

"Not particularly?" Dave flinches, groceries dropping. Glass smashing. A coke bottle exploding brown fizz across neon-slick pavement. His fingers grasping at the massive hand to try and push away.

"Get off of him!" Patricia kicks the attacker in the shin, scratches at his face. A snarling cat, claws flying. "Leave us alone, dickhead!"

The attacker grunts as her nails hit his scalp, his chin. He pulls at the strap of her tank top, spits on her cheek. A loud tearing sound as seams split, leaving her shoulder exposed. Dave yanks at greasy, long hair, contributing to the wild scramble of limbs as they defend themselves against this giant.

Just then, another tall man comes out of the 7/11. A biker in leather. Thick handlebar moustache. High cheekbones. "What the fuck is going on here?" A deep voice, makes the attacker look up.

Just by seeing someone his own size, the metalhead loosens his grip, full of cowardice.

Patricia jerks her arm away. Quickly backs up against the pane of the convenience store, wiping saliva off her face with a disgusted scoff. "Asshole! Fuck you!" Dave escapes too, turning into the arms of the leather-clad protector. Things click into place in Patricia's head at the sight.

"Fucking faggots." The metalhead starts to walk. Disgusted, but knows he can't win this. "You'll all burn in hell together."

"We'll be sure to see you there," The biker grunts, watching the coward retreat into the night. After a heavy stillness he turns to Dave, cups his face with shaky hands. "Christ." Distressed as he pets brown curls away from Dave's temples. "You alright, honey?"

Dave looks sheepish, glancing at Patricia with a touch of shame. Pulling back from that embrace to murmur, "We shouldn't act like that out here. Pretty much asking to get jumped." He steps towards Patricia, hands on her shoulders, fretting over her too now. "Did he hurt you?" He spots the damage, tries to fold her destroyed strap back over her shoulder. "Yikes, he tore your nice tank? I hate him."

"I'm fine. Did he hurt *you*?" Patricia has a palm over her heart, giving him a once-over. "God, I wish I had give him more than a bloody lip."

"We both put up a good fight." Dave backs away with a huff, glancing down at his shirt, picks at the fabric now sagging from the metalhead's pull. "Apparently I can't wear my cute-ass tee anywhere though."

"I *told* you not to wear it out here," The biker tuts, then looks at Patricia with the smokiest grey eyes. Handsome. "He wore it once on The Strip before. Got about the same response. I'm Adam, by the way." He reaches a hand out to shake hers. "You're the MTV girl."

"Also known as the Whore of Babylon, according to that dude." Patricia attempts humour, but there's a sadness in her smile.

"Of course, the Babylon hater likes to hang out in Babylon," Adam scoffs. "Hypocrite. Glad you bashed his mouth in."

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.” Dave begins to cross the sidewalk towards his van, glancing behind him. “Guessing you need a ride, Trish?”

“Yes, please.” She follows after him, Adam at her side. “Wish I had driven my car here, wouldn’t have gotten us both in this mess.”

Dave opens the side door for her and she climbs in the back of the van, stepping over the clutter of amps, guitar cases, empty chip bags. Buckles herself in, observing with a glow in her heart the way Adam runs a soothing hand through Dave’s hair. How he keeps a protective palm on the back of Dave’s seat.

Reminds her of Billy.

Dave drops off Adam only a few blocks from here. A Hollywood resident. Trish smiles when they kiss each other goodbye through the driver’s window. Dave staring at Adam adoringly as he walks away. So wholesome she could combust.

She crawls into the front seat now, settles in with a click of her seatbelt. “Well...he’s cute as hell.”

“I know.” Dave sighs dreamily, still gazing at Adam retreating into his apartment.

“How long have you been seeing each other?”

“Two months.”

She breathes a sigh. “I’m sorry I had to meet him that way. He seems really cool.”

Dave goes quiet. Gunning the engine. An eye over his shoulder to back out of their parking spot. “He’s like...fifteen years older than me.”

Patricia’s eyebrows raise. He looked way younger. Still doesn’t bother her though. “So what?”

“I dunno, never dated that old before.” He bites his lip in thought, then shoots a teasing wink at her. “I fucking *love* an experienced man

though. I've never been treated so deliciously."

Trish laughs, full of excitement for him. "I love you guys already."

"He wants to move to San Francisco." Dave's tone sounds cautious now. "Which is weird because we all just came from there."

"When?"

"Not sure," Dave says. "Just a general desire he has. I like it here but I like it there too." He turns to her. "So you want me to drive you to Rosco's? Practice got cut short because Nick never showed up, so Billy's there now. They're just hanging out, probably smoking a joint and yackin'."

Patricia shakes her head, dreads the thought of Billy finding out yet another problem. "It's getting pretty late now. I'd rather go home."

"He'd probably want to see you after being followed and attacked like that. Don't you wanna see him? I can get him to call you."

"No, it's fine," she shrugs. "Didn't get injured. Just startled and need a new shirt."

Then something in Dave's demeanour shifts. He drums his fingers against the wheel before sending her a glance that she'd only describe as critical. Not a look she expected from him. "You're *really* not ready to be in a relationship, are you?"

She tenses up. Shocked. "Where did that come from? I'm just tired."

"I dunno, everything Billy's told me." Dave unravels fast then, spills words he's obviously been holding back. A spitfire side of him bursting out. "Seems like you never want him to like...be there for you. Putting him down whenever he tries to help you out. Pushing him away all the time. You've got some major resistance, honey. Starting to see a pattern and it's not cute."

Her jaw drops at his sudden judgement. Realizing now that brutal honesty is just a feature of Dave's personality once you get to know him. How dare he?

"I'm not trying to push him away." She folds her arms tightly. "I just hate adding yet another anxiety to his life. To anyone's life. I hate having people worry about me. Makes me feel like a child, begging for attention or something."

Dave's not sold. "Whatever, Trish. He's so in love with you, you could literally crash his car, kick him in the balls, set him on fire and he'd still say thank you. Are you really that blind?"

Her fingernails clench into her skin. Stomach flipping, a sudden sweat breaking out. "He didn't say that..."

"No," Dave shrugs. "But I've known him long enough to know that this isn't *normal* for him. So it kinda bums me out when he's getting his feelings hurt constantly. He's really a sensitive baby underneath it all, you know. And *I'm* the one that has to be on the receiving end of his mood swings whenever you guys are having a problem. Which seems like every day now." He shakes his head. "I'm so done with it. Like, don't lead him on if you're not into him, girl. Just dump him and save both of you the pain. It's pretty simple."

"You don't know the whole story." A weak argument because she can't even tell Dave what the whole story is. "Not to mention he's probably broken more hearts in his life than I ever will." A defensive jab.

"You're not wrong," Dave admits. "He's gotta shitty past with women, not gonna lie about that."

That makes her fume. "And did you ever care about *those* girls? Did you care about *their* feelings getting hurt?"

"Okay, point taken." He clears his throat, a hint of guilt in the slump of his shoulders. "Look, I know that you've been through some intense shit lately, so I'm sorry if this is super harsh. But he's my best friend. I gotta watch out for him first. That's what best friends do. So, I'm just gonna get to my main question. Do you care about him? Do you really want to be with him? Because I honestly can't tell, Trish. You're a mystery to me."

Her throat closes up, dry. "I care about him more than anyone I've

ever been with,” she snaps. ‘I think about him all day, everyday. He’s the best thing in my life right now and I want him to stay in it. For a long time.’”

Facts that hit deep. Make her heart flutter because she’s never realized how true that is until now.

“Good!” Dave nods, a hand coming up in surrender. “That’s all what I wanted to hear.”

A long pause. A release between the two of them. The air cleared with how honest of an admission that was.

“I’m just struggling a lot with...everything right now,” she finally says. “It’s not good for anyone.”

“I hear you on that.” His judgement has eased up now, gone back to something more palatable. Friendlier. “Wanna know what I’m struggling with?” Maneuvering the conversation smoothly.

“Sure.” She wipes a sliver of moisture from the corner of her eye. Tries desperately not to lose composure in Dave’s van.

“I’m in love with Adam. I wanna move in with him but I haven’t even come out to my parents yet.”

That’s a surprise. She didn’t realize he was still in the closet with them. “Why not?”

“My mom. She’s super Catholic. Probably would have a heart attack. I’ve faked having girlfriends for like...” He tilts his head. “Ten years?”

“What about your dad?”

“He might be open to it. I dunno. He’s always been the more laid-back one. My mom’s always been super judgemental and probably would agree with that screaming lunatic we just met.” His jaw clenches. “She thumped those verses into me real good. Fire and brimstone. She threatened to never speak to me again when I moved to San Francisco to play in a metal band. Said I was aligning myself with Satan. Don’t even get me started about her opinion on the AIDS

crisis.”

“I’m sorry,” Patricia murmurs at that admission. “That’s terrible.”

“It’s okay. One day I’ll be brave.” He looks sheepishly at her, as though it’s not common for him to spill those details. “Fucked up childhood. Woe is me. Typical, right?”

“The way Billy described your upbringing, I would have thought it was idyllic.”

“Billy can be incredibly oblivious sometimes,” Dave snorts. “You’ve probably noticed by now.”

“We related about our childhoods once. He told me about his father, how rough it was. Maybe he projected an ideal family onto yours because that’s what he wanted to see. Maybe he wanted to hope for something.”

“Maybe. I know he got the shit end of the stick, though. My stuff was all mental, emotional. His was that too...and worse. Way worse. He never told me about the beatings, but I knew. You’d have to be dumb to not to notice his bruises. Met his dad enough times to fucking *know* what kinda asshole he is. I asked Billy about it more than once and he’d just shrug me off.” He hums out a breath, brows pinching together. “That’s impressive that he told you. I thought he’d take that to the grave. Couldn’t coax a word out of him.”

Patricia feels touched by that. Realizes how big of a deal it is that he’d tell a girl he’s only known for a few months about his messed up childhood, but not his best friend.

“See?” Dave grins. “That’s how I know he’d die for you. So *please* keep his heart safe, because I dunno if my boy can take it. *My* heart can’t take it.”

“I’ll try,” Patricia sighs. “Usually it’s people telling the dude that, you know. Not the girlfriend.”

“I’m always breaking the rules.”

After Patricia gives Dave clear directions to her apartment on the

other side of Hollywood, he pulls over. "Well, Trish. This is your..." He peeks out the window. "Wow, Billy wasn't lying. This place is fucking *snazzy*."

"It doesn't feel real to me," Patricia says. "Thanks for the ride, Dave. I'm sorry tonight had to be such a shit-show."

"It's not your fault. Thanks for listening to my troubles. One day you gotta tell me more about yours. Share the load. It helps, trust me."

"One day," she sniffs. No intention to share what's rapidly draining her, eating her alive. Her stomach and throat raw. A slight rasp from the purging marathon this week. "Dave...could you *not* tell Billy about me being followed tonight? I mean, just me being involved. I'd rather he not--"

"Yeah, just like how you never told Billy about me going to the car dealership with you?" Dave looks caught between a laugh and a desire to push her out the vehicle and drive away. "And after everything we just talked about tonight? Really?"

"Shit." Her mouth twists in a grimace. "I'm sorry. I told him not to get on your case about that."

"Don't worry," A sardonic light touches his eyes. "I think he only mentioned it about one hundred and fifty eight times."

Of course he did. Leave it to Billy to rub it in. "Okay, you got me." She lifts her purse over her shoulder. "Tell him everything, I suppose."

"He's gonna be on his way here before I even finish the sentence, so...be ready for that."

"Seems like you know him freakishly well."

"I'm like his conjoined twin," he grins. "It's really annoying being able to predict someone's every thought and action and always be a hundred percent accurate, by the way. Scares me sometimes."

"It's starting to scare me too," she smiles back. Amused and surprised by this feistier, more personal banter between them, though like

Billy, he touches on subjects too close for comfort. That shared bluntness between the two a huge commonality. Makes more and more sense why they're friends now. Billy likes authenticity.

She shifts in her seat with toss of her hair, hand on the car door handle to return to her apartment.

"Fuck!" Dave startles when his hand slaps his hands on the wheel, "How the hell did I just remember this now? Thanks for setting us up for this MTV halloween gig. I'm gonna pee my pants." He glances down. "Not these though. They're Valentino."

"You're welcome." She steps out onto the sidewalk, leans in the open window to waggle her fingers at him. "I'll see you there."

"Give Billy a big smooch for me when he gets here." Dave blows Trish a kiss. Waves prettily. "Bye, Trish. Stay safe."

His van cruises away, Queen booming into the calm of this elegant street.

*

"Shouldn't have gone to practice," Billy grumbles against her bare shoulder, spooning in her new round bed. Arms containing her. Sheets velvety-smooth. "We didn't even play like more than three songs. I should have just stayed and then none of this would ever happened."

"I hurt him more than he hurt me. Well, except he did spit on me which was pretty gros--"

"He fucking *spat* on you? Trish..."

"It's fine. I took a shower."

"It's not fine to me," Billy huffs in exasperation. "God, I'm starting to feel like if I leave you alone for two seconds, the most bizarre shit happens to you. Just wish it would stop."

Muscles clench. Her throat tightens, words falling out in a croak. "It's not my fault, Billy." Feels like she's telling it to herself too, like her

own palm stroking her back in reassurance. "It's not my fault..."

"Of course it's not. I didn't mean for it to sound that way." His hand strokes down her forearm to caress her fingers. "Just get real fucking worried, especially after what that cop said to you. Feel like I can't do anything."

Exactly why she didn't want Dave to tell him. She's getting pretty sick of it as well, this constant ganging up of forces, spiralling around her. A nightmare that never ends, sucking everyone she cares about into its depths. A whirlpool that drags everyone down to hell with her.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," she says guiltily.

They go quiet, though she can tell he's bursting at the seams. A long silence drags out, bristling because he's just *itching* to say something. She can feel it as strongly as his touch. Knows she won't get any sleep with that it just lingering around her, suffocating.

"I saw your latest episode," he finally mutters. "At Rosco's."

All her insides go cold. "You did?"

"Yeah. They always play a rerun at midnight." He shifts behinds her, keeps his tone gentle but wary. "That outfit. Is that why you didn't want me to watch?"

A strained shrug. "It kinda makes that whole Whore of Babylon argument more reasonable, doesn't it?" She attempts a joke but it doesn't aid the anxiety of his knowing. Of not even having seen what he's seen.

"It's not you wearing it that bothers me," he says. Chooses careful tones. "It's how you didn't want me to see you wear it. Like....you weren't entirely comfortable but did it because you felt like you had to. That's what I'm not cool with."

"That's show biz, Billy." The only excuse she can come up with. Too dead tired to bullshit better.

Another tip-toeing pause. "You had a few drinks off-camera too,

right?”

Fuck.

“...yeah.” She moves uncomfortably in his arms. Feels utterly compressed.

“Why?”

Pinned down. Wings behind glass. Everyone has something to fucking say.

“Billy,” She twists in his hold, snapping. “This is why I didn’t want you to watch it, okay? I really don’t want to be lectured right now. I’ve got so much shit on my mind. I don’t need this too.”

He lets her go. “Look, I just get-“

“Please don’t say worried. I’m so sick and tired of-“

Just then the phone rings. Rattling by her bedside. She stares at the red glow in pitch dark, not sure who’d call her this early in the morning.

Probably a wrong number.

Or Derek.

“You gonna get that?” Billy murmurs as the third ring echoes.

“If it’s important they’ll leave a message,” she says darkly into the mattress. Just plain done with life. Grabbing a heavy pillow to plant over her exposed ear. “I just want to sleep...”

The machine does go to message, a frantic voice on the other end:

“Hey, Patty. Is everything okay? It’s Auntie Doris. I just had this really sharp feeling past several days. Some really bad dreams too. The cards are all wrong, I just-”

Her palm slaps over the phone handle. Whips it to her ear in a flash. “Auntie?”

A sigh of relief. "I am so, so sorry to wake you, hun. I just had the *worst* feeling. Couldn't stop thinking about you. Came to a head past few minutes and I had to call. Didn't even know you had moved, had to ring up Amy to figure out where the hell you were! Are you okay?"

"That seems to be the question of the night but I'm fine." Patricia skips over entire stories, whole sagas. "Sorry for not telling you about moving." She winds the cord around her fingers, stomach now churning, heart pounding because Auntie wouldn't do all of this lightly. "What did the cards say? What did you see?"

"The Devil reversed. The Tower and the Moon again." A breath. "And again. And again. I'm *very* upset, Patty." A pause. "Is your boyfriend there with you?"

She freezes, glances over her shoulder at a now perked-up Billy in the shadows. "How...did you know?"

"King of Wands and the Lovers remember? The cards never lie."

"You're a little too good." Patricia swallows, clicks on her lamp. Orange creamsicle glow humming. "He is right here, actually."

"May I speak to him?"

"Really?" This night just keeps getting weirder.

"It's important."

Patricia turns to Billy, now leaning up on his elbow, blinking at fresh light. Knuckle rubbing at an eyelid. The tension between them steadily being overtaken by this surprise event.

She cups a palm over the mouthpiece. "It's Auntie Doris." The phone gets placed in his hand. "She wants to talk to you."

He wordlessly brings the phone to his ear. Shifts to charm automatically, that husky tone melting out like honey.

"*Hi Doris*. Heard a lot about you." He nudges closer to Patricia. Links a leg over hers, running a hand through perfect bedhead. "It's Billy."

Uh-huh. Yeah, I know. I agree. Huh. You don't say." A dragging pause, his long-lashed eyes meeting hers. The corner of his mouth slightly grinning. "Salt. Lots of salt. I'll make sure she does that. Yeah, I think she has that big rock lying around somewhere. How's the water out in Santa Barbara right now? Wow. Cool, gotta take my board up there soon one day. Thank you. Yeah, you seem nice too. Good talking to ya. Alright, here she is. Bye-bye."

He hands the phone back to her, grin sparkling even wider now.

Patricia sighs before mumbling into plastic, "I can't believe you just lectured him about salt."

"He seems like a good boy," her aunt muses, "though I am usually skeptical about the flirtatious, wildly handsome types."

Her mouth parts, a startled laugh almost escaping. "You've literally never seen him, Auntie." She cradles the phone in her neck, stretches for a glass of water left on her side table. Sips to find it a bit stale now. Soothes her rusty throat anyways.

"He has a voice for it," Doris says lightly. Billy reaches to twine their fingers together. "It's a good thing he'd die for you, otherwise I'd say *get your hands off my niece, Casanova.*"

Patricia nearly spit-takes. She gulps and sets the cup back down with a cough. "I thought you said that you weren't that psychic."

"This boy's aura is just *screaming* at me. I can practically see him now." She clicks her tongue, sympathetic. "Poor little charmer. Does he have anywhere nice to go for Thanksgiving? Seems lonely."

"*Where* are you getting all of this from? You're just summoning information out of nowhere."

"I think it's the menopause."

She gives a quiet laugh. "I knew there was some perks." A glance at the clock. Almost four in the morning. "Okay Auntie. I love you, but—"

"I like him."

“Auntie...”

“Sorry, sweetie. Before I go: don’t forget the salt. Stay out of trouble. Don’t trust shady people.” A breath. “Do you have pepper spray?”

Patricia smears a hand down her haggard face. “No, but I’ll do what I can. I *really* gotta go to sleep. We’ll talk soon, okay?”

“Goodnight, Patty-honey. I love you. Stay safe.”

That parting message is starting to get to her.

“I love you too. Goodnight.” A long exhale as she hangs up. Clicks off the light. “Oh my *god*, you two...” She just shuts down, head plopping against the pillow. Her eyes close by themselves, can barely keep them open.

“I like her,” Billy mumbles as he nestles even closer, their tiff now lost its fire. Both of them too close to dreams to fight at this point. Patricia relinquishing control, burrowing into him because she just needs his strength instinctively. Bone-tired.

“She’s the best.” A yawn, lashes fluttering against the warm skin of his chest. The nagging in the back of her mind dissolving. Her aunt’s words, everyone’s fears, all getting buried by the heavy blanket of sleep.

Billy keeps curled around her. Right before she drifts off, he whispers. “Trish?”

She smacks her lips drowsily. “Uh-huh?”

“I’m fucking nervous about playing on MTV.”

“You’ll do great.” She presses a lazy kiss on him. Soothing, as lavender clouds start to descend.

Then an idea pops from the ether. Big and bright. Forces her eye-lids open one last time.

She should share at least a single truth before she passes out. Relieve the pressure cooker bubbling deep inside of her, take a step towards

openness. "One thing though, I forgot to tell you."

"Yeah, baby?" His voice rumbles deep under her ear. Comforting.

She squeezes him tighter. "I'm...co-hosting The Halloween Special with Jon Bon Jovi."

He stiffens up for a beat. Shifts with a stretch, inhaling sharp with a bleary groan. "*What?*"

Notes for the Chapter:

yeah, we all know the next chapter is gonna be rollercoaster of the decade so woooo lets do it FINALLY

would love to hear your thoughts on this one.

thanks for hanging with me ! <3

24. the devil reversed

Notes for the Chapter:

Uh, this chapter is crazy but we all saw it coming. Hopefully. I'm not sure if it's done or if I just can't stand reading it anymore lol.

TW: frottage smut, cocaine use, attempted sexual assault? blood, vomit/bulimia. the works.

I hope I did this one justice!

Patricia dreams of the Hammer Horror mansion again.

Haunted and sheathed in darkness, eery-white and daunting. The tombstones, the snakes, the blue-eyed kitten curling under heavy jewelled fingers, shaking. A montage of fear.

She wakes up, panting, remembering Auntie Doris's warning. Remembering The Devil reversed.

That evening, the night of the Halloween Special, she takes a cab to the address Barry had given her, leaves her car at home because she's not sure if she's going to drink or not. The show is to be filmed at one of his many houses, tucked in a palm-laden corner of Venice. When she arrives, her jaw drops.

Not a house. It's the mansion from her dreams. Bone-white. Cliffside, looming. Degenerate energy creeping off of it, metal emanating. The windows draped in skulls, spiders, webs. The black lawn thick with graves. A long line of gleaming cars outside, circling the front roundabout, dropping off rockstars to the beat of White Snake. Some of them already staggering as they enter the ominous building.

Patricia steps out of the cab, enters through tall crimson doors to find an even deeper red inside. She walks the main foyer, astounded at the level of artistry, taste, and overall creepiness. A drooping chandelier on the ceiling, trickling wax. Long tables, full of food that's so seasonal, it's disgusting. Finger-cookies. Eyeball punch. The

decapitated head of a screaming blonde woman in the center of the table. A laughing metalhead pokes it and she watches as it jiggles grotesquely. Sculpted gelatin.

Patricia flashes back to her dream of the rotten feast. How similar this all is. The tone. The energy. Almost a perfect match.

She wanders red halls, passes deformed mannequins, cackling automated witches. Pumpkins leering, some vomiting their insides. The light in their eyes flickering all directions at once. She peels back cobwebs to finally find her dressing room, her full name scrawled in red ink across the door. Opens it to pitch darkness. Her fingers skim the wall to flick on the light and reveal a starkly plain room. Beige-walled and undecorated, with MTV playing in the corner beside a sofa set.

There are two outfits left on a rack for her in sheets of plastic. A sign that says *take your pick* pasted on.

She rips back the plastic, a crimson devil costume and a black cat leotard left in her hands. Horns and furry ears complimentary. Neither of them were discussed but both are plenty revealing.

The cat outfit is somehow the scariest thing she's seen in this mansion so far. One stroke of her thumb across black satin and her dream comes back in blinding flashes. That helpless kitten under ringed fingers. Meowing tones high and afraid. She sets the satin back on the rack. Shimmies the tight dress up her legs.

Red leather that barely covers top or bottom. Little red horns. A pointed red leather tail that dangles at the back of bare thighs. As she zips up the back she realizes she's breathing shallow and rapid, a rush of claustrophobia as she adjusts her cleavage in the mirror, fluffs up golden locks. She straightens her spine in an attempt to steady her nerves, forces air deeper into her lungs.

When she leans towards her reflection to coat her lips in rich cherry gloss, Billy enters the room.

"Hate this place," he huffs. "Scary as shit. Just about punched some vampire asshole that tried to fuck with me."

“Billy,” She spins to face him. “You’re early.”

“Wanted to see how you were doing.” He shuts the door behind him, stops to take her curves in. Slinks up behind her, arms circling her waist as he kisses her cheek, her neck, their eyes locking in the mirror with sultry focus. “Damn. Suddenly I’m extremely interested in Satanism.”

Patricia turns her head so their mouths meet. A relieved feeling of safety at his warmth, his touch. She realizes then that he’s just dressed in a leather jacket, no shirt under it. Tight blue jeans. Black boots. Nothing out of the norm for him. “What are you supposed to be?”

“The Terminator. Duh.” Billy slides dark shades from the crown of his head. Perches them on the edge of his nose. “I’ll be back.”

“You’re dressed how you always are,” she pouts. “I’m pretty sure you wore that last time I saw you play.”

“I’m not big into dressing up,” he shrugs, pressing another kiss into her now-jutting bottom lip.

“Here.” Patricia slides off her horns. Plants them on his head. “You can be Satan.” She unties her tail and wraps it around his waist to complete the look. Takes a moment to admire how it hangs off the slope of his ass. “Suits you better.”

“Well, well. Ain’t I a handsome devil.” Billy grins at her in the mirror before preening, straightening his horns, batting his lashes. “But now what are you going to be?”

Patricia glances behind her at the outfit she passed up, shining black in fluorescent light. “A cat.” She turns to Billy. “Can you unzip me?”

The corner of his mouth lifts. That glint in his eye, devilish to begin with, now looking near-evil in his current attire. Dripping sin.

“I’d be overjoyed,” he purrs, gloating. She bats his arm lightly at the overt seduction, twirls around to let his fingers descend.

Then the television next to them fills with static. A hissing sound

follows, makes them both jerk their heads towards the intrusion. Patricia's red mouth appears onscreen, tongue sliding over lips, lascivious and glistening wet. The camera scans up to her closed eyes. They blink open to reveal white orbs. Bats swarm the screen until it's completely black.

"Jesus Christ," Billy finishes his handiwork and spins her away from the menacing sight. "The fuck did they do to you? Creepy as hell." He gives a noticeable shudder.

She laughs. "For a big tough metalhead, you sure are easily scared."

Billy crosses his arms, juts his chin. "Just hate monsters creepin' up outta nowhere. The world's full of enough of them already."

Patricia slips out of her dress. Billy leans against the vanity counter, watching lazily but rapt. Observing as she steps one leg at a time into the black unitard. The fabric skin-tight, slick and sparkling like stars on her. Snapping onto her skin as she pulls on the sleeves. Little cat ears slide on and she turns to him with arms raised. "How do I look?"

His heavy-lidded gaze sweeps over her, feels like a caress. "I'd say 'cute' but that wouldn't be enough to justify my raging boner right now."

She rolls her eyes. "You're an endless well of perversion."

"Hey, I *am* The Devil after all," he smirks, backing her into the vanity. An ambush. "Now. Gimme some sugar, kitten."

"*Kitten?*" She makes a face before Billy seizes her thighs to lift her onto the counter. He begins to slowly maul, cupping every soft curve. Smearing red gloss. Melting flimsy armour with skillful tongue and teeth. She gasps into his mouth when broad fingers stroke between her splayed thighs. Zeroing in with the intent to make her ache, beg to be filled. A light yet dizzying pressure.

"Real shame this outfit isn't designed for easy access." He growls under his breath at satin dampening. "Fuck. I'll let you be The Devil if you let me rip this thing open."

"We are *not* having a quickie now, Billy," Patricia moans through the

muggy haze of arousal. Forces herself to pull back, wipes the candy-coloured mess off his face with her thumb. "Those horns make you act extra gross, you know."

"Huh," Billy grins. "Must be why I feel right at home in them." He leans in to kiss her again, even hungrier.

"*Billy*," she whines as he continues to neck her with animal lust. "Barry's gonna be here any minute..." It's not that convincing because now she's kissing him back with matching heat.

He nips at her bottom lip. "Is it wrong that I want him to watch?"

"Yes?" She squirms, thighs clamping tight around him, hands skimming under his leather jacket to scrape her nails down hot skin. She giggles helplessly at her own hunger. "*Why* are we doing this?"

"Hmm, how would Satan answer that?" A hand slips down the front of her costume to circle her nipple, flick and tease. "Something like... temptation is the first step on the path to sin, sweetheart."

He cups her bottom to bring her closer. Presses his hard-on against her center. The pressure of the girth through his rough jeans angling perfectly. Rubbing against her through the thin, wet fabric. She breathes in sharp bursts in his ear as he grinds his hips even more erotically, chuckling against her earlobe at how quick she is to burn up.

"Oh *no*," he croons huskily. "Does that feel too good?" A burst of delicious sensation, now building more fast than should be possible. "Tell me to stop." A flat-out taunt.

It's too late now. She knows exactly where this is leading and has no will to stop whatsoever. "If you keep doing that...mmh." She drifts off with a moan. Her toes clenching as he ruts against her, his fingers pinching her nipple so she sparks inside. So close to coming right there. Ridiculous how easy it is for her to be swept away.

"You're too sweet, baby," he rasps in her ear. Keeping rhythm, his hands now on her ass, guiding her hips to even more pleasurable friction. "Such a sensitive girl. Want to watch you come, make a

sticky mess in your panties for me before everyone else sees you—”

Then Barry enters the room. Both of them freeze, heads snapping towards the door. Limbs unclasping.

“Barry! Um, I—” Patricia fumbles to her feet, glancing down to make sure her breasts aren’t out.

“Ah Patricia,” Moore hums, pointed snakeskin shoes clicking across the hardwood. Unperturbed. “Billy, is it?”

“Yessir.” Billy casually shifts to lean against the counter behind him, equally calm. Like they were just chilling on opposite sides of the room when her boss burst in.

Dark eyes scan Billy with undisguised animosity. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

Billy catches the instant dislike pushed towards him, sends it right back. “Same,” he says coldly. Perches a Marlboro in his mouth, palming his jacket for a lighter. Moore extends a golden zippo, wordless. Lights the end of Billy’s cigarette with a flick of his wrist, the room vibrating with sudden strain.

Smoke circulates. Billy’s eyes narrowing behind a haze, watching Barry with clear distrust. Their energies clashing on sight. Both with auras that fill rooms. One with feral magnetism, the other with deadly mobster chic. Neither ready to be the weaker.

Moore decides to ignore her lover. Turns to her with glowing rapture. “You’re on in twenty, my dear.” A lewd gaze strokes down her body. “You look ravishing. A feast for the eyes.”

“Thanks...” Patricia clears her throat, shifts awkwardly. Watches Billy glare, can practically see steam shoot from his ears at the undercurrent of flirtation.

She gets a sense right then that it’s going to be a very long night.

*

The show goes smoothly. At first.

It begins onstage in the grand hall of the mansion. Metalhead upon metalhead upon metalhead in the audience. Half in Halloween costumes, the other in the costumes they already wear every day. She spots various famous bands in the crowd: Motley Crue, Guns and Roses, Poison. A couple of other lesser knowns for contrast, including Cat's Eye, performing a long set amongst these heavyweights.

There's one glass of red wine in her and nothing else as she glides across the platform to the cheer of hundreds. Flashing bulbs leave her with stars behind her eyes. She feels the camera span her body, an ogling lens.

Patricia takes the mic, smiles and waves, barely breathes as she introduces Guns and Roses to the crowd. Retreats to take her place in the corner of the front row to watch, star-struck and grateful.

Then there's a streak of black in the corner of her eye. Height and darkness. Pale skin.

A glance around the room reveals nothing.

She blanches, gets a chill. Could have sworn she just saw Derek but whatever just flitted past her disappeared like a ghost.

It's just your imagination, she tells herself, even as she continues to scan teased hair and eyeliner. Zombies and ghouls. Watchful for a certain hollow-cheeked face, that beautiful corpse hovering.

He doesn't materialize. She turns back to the stage, and gets a jolt of fear when an elbow brushes her.

It's Jon Bon Jovi, now come up beside her to nudge. Not much words can be heard over Axl's wail and Slash's guitar but he gets her attention with cheesy dimples and a dusting of stardom. The set ends and he leaps onstage to flash zebra skin tights, exotic scarves, his bobbing mop of straw-coloured hair. Lightly banter in the mic, plays with the stand to the cheer of women in the audience. She's sure she hears some boos intermingled, though Jon seems unaffected.

Next, they'll introduce Cat's Eye together. She adjusts her fuzzy ears,

saunters up steps to get onstage. Becomes thoroughly antsy when Jon puts an arm around her less than a second into their dialogue. Which for some reason, is entirely unscripted.

Leave it Barry Moore to keep her utterly confounded.

“Hey, what’s new, *pussy cat*?” Jon asks her, ever-smiling to the roar of the crowd. She can barely suppress a grimace in response, despite knowing Barry insisted that they flirt.

“Not much, Jon Bon.” She keeps her tone cute, hates how fake it sounds. “I sure am excited for our next band though.”

“What’s their name again? I can’t remember. Aren’t they named after a marble or something?”

This time the camera catches her cringing. “Cat’s Eye.” This is so bad. So, so bad. “They’re up and coming on The Strip. A local favourite.”

“Cat’s Eye, huh?” Jon never stops with wide, white teeth. Feels like he’s going unhinge his jaw and stow her away in his gullet. “You know what that means.”

“What’s that, Jon?”

“Tons of pussy in the house tonight. Amirite?” He extends his mic to the crowd, now cheering like crazed loons.

“I had a feeling you’d say that, Jon.” Patricia smiles through her teeth. Glances down stage to see Billy waiting in the shadowy wings meters away, arms folded. Glowering at the rockstar with his arm around her. Red horns glowing from reflecting stage light, smoke spiralling white from the cigarette dangling between his lips. Positively demonic.

“Aw, isn’t she cute?” Jon screams towards the audience who scream back. “Cute enough for a kiss?” The crowd explodes, so deafening her ears are ringing.

“Wait, wha-” She’s cut off by dry lips against her own. The arm around her now keeping her in a headlock as he pushes his tongue in her mouth. She shoves him off with both hands. Shocked. Wiping his

saliva off of her with a sputtering *what the fuck*.

Jon backs off with a laugh as booming cheers continue at her offense, seeming to enjoy her embarrassment. Watches, cackling, as she retreats into the opposite wing, shrouded in curtains, pissed and humiliated. "And now without further ado, here's *Cat's Eye*!"

Cat's Eye comes onto the stage in full force, Dave and Rosco looking eager and poised. Even Nick looking unusually alert. But then to Patricia's widening eyes, Billy flicks his cigarette to the floor and stalks towards Jon currently placing the mic back on the stand.

Billy's eyes are furious, his body taut as a bullet. Jon cluelessly unaware he's the target. Before Jon can sidestep, Billy shoulder-checks him so hard he loses all balance, teetering at the lip of the stage.

Jon falls with a yelp, sucked into a screaming mob. Patricia watches him get swallowed, devoured by a horde of fangirls. Groping and pulling at him with shrill squeals. His scarves flying. Vest ripping. One of them shrieking *I have his hair!* to the sound of Cat's Eye's brain-melting guitar.

She hopes to god it makes him feel used.

The absolute venom in that thought takes her by surprise, seems to come from somewhere deep, endlessly bitter.

Bon Jovi's head peeks out from the writhing mass. He gives Patricia a thumbs up and a wink from afar. She sighs before peeking at Billy now behind the drumkit, angrily breaking into a solo, having the audience rapt before him, the air bubbling with chaos.

Despite subtly enjoying Billy avenging her, tonight's still all too intense. She goes backstage to the dressing room and rinses her mouth out. Sips more red wine to drown out any lingering taste, numb those nerves.

Nothing drowns out the ever present dread that the worst is yet to come. A burning tower crumbles in her mind until only rubble is left.

Patricia finds Billy sitting in Cat's Eye's dressing room with Rosco and Nick. Resting for a ten minute intermission, a break before they play the second half of their set.

She sidles up next to him. Pokes his bare chest. "You are in so much trouble."

"Don't like big-mouthed losers kissin' my girl," Billy shrugs, clearly still pissed, though he settles down to circle an arm around her. "Sorry."

He's not sorry.

"I didn't totally mind it," she says.

Billy's brows raise. "Really?"

"Not like he got that hurt, and it was kind of funny to watch him fall." Patricia slowly grins, meets Billy's baby-blue gaze. "He should put that scream in his next song."

Billy grins back, followed by a shake of his head. "Nah. Shoulda pushed him way harder. Never want to hear another fucking Bon Jovi song again."

"*Billy.*" She elbows him for his dark humor. A moment of comfortable silence follows.

Then Nick chuckles to himself in the corner, dark sunglasses on. Obviously higher than when she last saw him onstage.

"What's so funny, Nick?" Patricia finds herself asking, buzzed enough now to actually speak to him without thinking of the repercussions.

He sprawls arms out on the sofa, leans his head back with a raise of his shoulders. "Oh, nothing. Just that Billy-boy here never really had a problem with the concept of kissing another man's woman til he met you."

That lands like an anvil through glass. Leaves a resounding tension in the room.

Billy nearly reveals fangs. “*Nick*.” Just the way he says his name would be enough to silence most. A gun cocked.

“You wouldn’t want to know about that though,” Nick continues with unfazed confidence.

Patricia shifts under Billy’s arm, peering towards the peroxide blonde. “Why wouldn’t I want to know?” The muscles in Billy’s body tighten up to iron beside her.

“Should I tell her my favourite story?” Nick gives Billy the most triumphant leer.

Billy leans to give Nick a death glare. His tone comes out so menacing, Patricia gulps, gets the urge to unhook his arm curled around her. “Shut the fuck up.”

“What?” Nick sneers. “You haven’t told her?”

A shiver crawls up her spine at that. “Told me what?”

Billy’s close to hissing. “I’m fucking serious, man-“

“Let him speak, Billy.” Trish touches his leg to silence him. Says words firmly even as a terrible dread spreads to every cell in her body, knowing whatever Nick is going to say is going to ruin what’s left of her night.

Nick sits to full attention, slants forward with a delirious grin behind his shades, as though he’s never been more happy to reveal this tale. “My favourite, absolutely most *treasured* story about our friend Billy is definitely that party we went to after his old band played Ruthie’s nightclub.”

Billy is pale under his tan now. Very still. Body taut. Eyes on the floor.

“Go on.” Trish says, now too curious to let this go.

“Well.” Nick sighs theatrically, makes a show of remembering. “Those were the San Fran days. Buddy here had been dating this really nice girl for about a month. Looked just like you. Blonde.

Pretty. Then again, all the girls around him that time were blonde and pretty, just like I told you before.” He laughs, shifts closer with the most self indulgent smile. “What did you call them, Billy? The Blonde Marathon?”

He doesn’t answer.

Patricia removes her hands from Billy’s thigh, suddenly queasy. Looks around to find Rosco is now gone, left them there to deal.

“That night,” Nick goes on, “right about midnight, when we’re all bumpin’ lines of Mother of Pearl, Billy’s favourite at the time. Fucking *flying* on that shit, Billy suddenly outta nowhere says that he’s gonna go down on her in front of the whole party. Begs her for it. A whole crowd gathering around to watch...”

She glances at Billy who seems to be caught in some glitch. Frozen. Smoking with a haunted gaze, only his profile available to her, looking away, facing the wall.

“So then he does. Takes her panties off. Starts doing the deed. Everyone’s cheering and hollering. He does a pretty good job, I’ll admit it. Dude’s got skills.” Nick wiggles his brows at Billy to further provoke. “She’s writhing, moaning, the whole fucking works. Finally comes. The crowd goes wild.” Nick claps his hands to imitate applause. Then he stops, tone going mean. “Then the fucker leans in her ear and breaks up with her right there. Left her there crying. Banged another chick that night who... happened to be my girlfriend at the time.” Nick’s expression ends on a sour note.

Patricia stays still in shock. Slowly looks at Billy to croak, “Is that true?”

Billy won’t look at either of them, mouth pressed in a hard line. So stone-like, she can’t read him at all. He stands up and walks right out the room.

“Oh dear,” Nick tuts with fake sympathy. “Did I hit a nerve?” Patricia sits in a horrified daze. “Aw, don’t worry, peaches. What’s past is past, right?”

She bolts from her seat to follow Billy, now leaning against the wall outside. Dave emerges from the end of the corridor just as she clutches Billy's arm.

"The Blonde Marathon? Please tell me Nick is lying in there."

Watery eyes finally meet hers, full of overwhelm. "He's not." Billy says hoarsely. "I'm so fucking sorry, I didn't-"

"What the fuck, Billy..." Her heart explodes into blood, her voice breaking. She shoves at his shoulder, has the sudden urge to scream til her lungs shatter. "What the fuck!"

Dave rushes up, eyes darting between them. "Guys, we're on in like one minute. What are you all still doing back here?"

She shoots lasers into him with one look. "Thanks for getting on my case about loyalty, Dave. Fuck you."

Patricia pushes past them, begins to storm off towards the stage but Billy catches her arm, murmuring desperately, "I can explain-"

"Don't touch me." She jerks her arm away. Hating herself more than him right now. For falling for him. For believing he might actually be a good person.

"Trish, wait-" He follows after, attempts another grasp of her hand.

"I said, do *not* touch me." Patricia pulls away again. Parts red velvet curtains, grits her teeth and smiles for the camera. Eyes sparkling tears as she takes the mic.

Jon comes up to her, cautiously glancing over her shoulder at Billy as he plunks himself behind the drum kit, a haunted, self-loathing look behind his gaze. That little boy coming out all hurt and tragic again.

Patricia would almost feel sorry for him if her heart wasn't currently black and oozing.

"And once more, here's Live Wire!" She slams the mic into Jon's hand. Mutters low to him, "It's all yours now."

Jon's eyes go huge. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't be up here. You take over."

She stumbles offstage. Rips plush black ears off. Can't control the tears exploding behind her eyeballs, her nose running. Lurching through the mansion, past gargoyles, and punch bowls of gooey eyes. The cackling of witches in her ears.

She knew it. She knew there was truth in what Nick said that night at the bonfire and she didn't listen. Didn't want to listen. Taken for a ride all over again. Just another whore in the Blonde Marathon.

How could he?

How could he be everything she was afraid he was?

How could she let her guard down like that? Had she learned nothing?

She finds the long table of food by the entrance. Starts devouring. Not even caring that celebrities nearby are watching her shove food in her mouth with obscene recklessness. That orange-coated chocolate fudge is all over her fingers, smearing over her trembling lips. Wet lashes leaving a trail of tear drops across the white tablecloth.

She retrieves an opened bottle of Merlot stacked in ice. Pops the cork, starts wandering the mansion with delirious footsteps as she chugs back a sip every few seconds. Starting to feel that delicious soothing numbness in her limbs. Going deeper and deeper into the mansion, further and further past all sorts of monsters and looming ghosts.

She just keeps walking. Walking and searching for something she can't quite pinpoint. Walking until no other people have been in sight for a long while. Until she can't hear Billy's drumming anymore.

*

At the end of one of the long red carpeted hallways on the third landing, she sees two large doors, classical music emanating from behind them. She clicks them open. Enters a huge room full of

mahogany and leather. Black and red erotic statues everywhere, contorted into grotesque positions. Women bent over, faces in pain. Men dragging them around by dog collars. Gagged and bound.

She finds herself stepping into and past the disturbing imagery, disoriented, feeling like she's in someone's sick, erotic fantasy yet unable to turn away. She travels down a short hallway within the room. Sees a bald man facing away from her. His figure seated on a black leather couch.

Barry, surrounded by luxurious debauchery. Multiple televisions stacked high around him. Oudh incense and the stink of fresh sweat. A topless woman kneeling between his still clothed legs.

He spots her then, jolting to alertness. Dismisses the girl away with the curt wave of his hand. His pants are still done up. She must have interrupted them before the act.

Patricia sees the matching dizzy haze in the girl's eyes as she passes by her. Gone from the room a moment later.

"Shouldn't you be onstage, Patricia?" Barry says with tense vowels. He looks to the television next to him, where Live Wire are playing. Inaudible, only a series of violins in her ears from the record player crackling in the corner.

"Something...really shitty just happened."

Barry gestures next to him, his eyes lighting up at that. Hint of a smile at his mouth. "Care to talk about it?"

She's lightheaded as she sits down at the furthest end of the couch, stomach full but legs weak from wine. Putting as much distance between them as possible, yet something sucking her towards Barry. Something nameless, a ravenous thing in her that needs sating. "Not really."

"No?" He crosses his legs towards her. "Why don't you just relax, poor thing. Here, we'll watch something." Barry points a remote to turn another tv on.

Her image flashes. Glowing bare flesh taking up the whole television

set. Frozen in time, as though the tape was already in the process of being watched, wearing the outfit that she didn't want Billy to see.

Patricia gets a jolt of unease. "I haven't seen that episode yet."

"My favourite one." Barry schmoozes, moving the image of her frame by frame until her half-cast eyes fill the screen, then her parted drunk mouth. "Love how open you are here. So free. Beautiful and loose, not a care in the world." Barry sees the bottle of wine in her hand and chuckles. "I do love how fun you can get."

"Would you like some?" She offers the wine to Barry to make him stop talking. "I think I drank half of it already."

His smile gets bigger and bigger. "I have wine glasses." He presses the play button to get onscreen Patricia in constant motion. Stands up to tend to his liquor cabinet. That's when she sees his arousal. She pretends she didn't, focuses towards the other muted Patricia, now laughing hysterically and silent. Beautiful. Loose.

Lost.

Barry comes back with two goblets, sits down next to her. Much closer now, their legs nearly touching. He takes the bottle from her, and pours with flourish.

"To Live Wire, and it's glorious new beginning," Barry holds his glass up, shifts so his leg grazes hers. "And above all, it's stunning screen-siren. On top of the world and she's only begun."

They clink glasses. Sip.

Then she spots the baggie of cocaine laid on the clear glass coffee table.

Patricia gestures with her glass towards the powder. "What does that stuff feel like anyway?" Another taste of Merlot. Everything getting less and less clear. The pain feeling further and further away as she staggers onscreen. Flesh and curve. Flirting, simpering, numb. MTV's perfect woozy sex doll.

Nothing inside. Nothing inside.

"You've never had it?" Barry asks lightly.

"No. Seems I'm the only one in the world that hasn't." She pauses. "In this world anyways."

"And it's a beautiful world, isn't it?" Barry swirls his glass.

She snorts at that optimism. "It can get real ugly."

Barry doesn't acknowledge that truth. "Cocaine is...domination. Ruling everything. Myself. Others. The whole room." He leans to form immaculate lines with a black and gold credit card "I never feel so in control as when I experience that rush." A glance back at her. "Would you like some?"

And there, right there, her usual self control falters. Barriers broken. "I want to see what the big fuss is about." Wants to know if it'll make her feel invincible for once. Or maybe she'll feel nothing. She'd like to feel even more nothing.

Or maybe it'll make her want to abuse and exploit others. Turn her cold and heartless. She's curious to know that feeling. Find its poisonous source. Would like to be on the other side of the hand that keeps crushing her. To know what the sensation is that Derek and Billy and so many men in her life were and are slave to.

What is the big deal?

What came first, the drugs, or the exploitation?

Barry hands a rolled up bill to her. "Do I need to explain how?"

"No, I've seen it done so many times, I could probably do it in my sleep." A truth she would never admit until this moment.

She bends, bill to nostril. Lines her nose up with pretty white powder and inhales sharp.

A flushing rise of energy. Electric silver through her boozy dream. Clarity and a buzz that's needle-like, followed by utter regret that envelops her just as piercing.

"You're a natural," Barry praises. "What shall we watch now? What fun shall we discover?" He turns the volume up on the television playing Cat's Eye's set, disorienting next to the visual of her onscreen. Billy's drumming rushes through her body just as the drug hits harder. "Shall we watch him play?"

Patricia flinches, wishes cocaine didn't make this dream more vivid, clear. "Can we not?"

"What's wrong, dear? A lover's spat?" Barry's tongue clicks, zero sympathy in it. "Something tells me he didn't treat you as wonderfully as you deserve."

"He proved himself to be a total asshole," she says bitterly. "A liar."

"All men are, dear." Barry smiles, teeth razor-like. "Number one rule about men: don't trust them." He inches closer.

"Billy got so pissed seeing Jon kiss me," she continues, choosing to ignore yet again. The urge to speak and vent taking over as euphoria grips her, words spewing faster, sensations heightening more and more. "-then it turns out he's no better. Just as disgusting." She slurps back bittersweet wine. "But at the same time, I can't believe Jon kissed me on live television. What an attention-whore. Could you believe it?"

"Yes." Barry leans and snorts a flawless line. Comes up with a loud sniff. The rings on his fingers glimmering jewels as he wipes the back of his hand under his nose. "I told him to."

Her glass hovers near her lips. Wine trickling at the corner of her mouth before she thumbs it away. "You what?"

"We must think of the viewers, Patricia." He looks manically happy now. "So important to feed their hunger."

And that's when she sees the master of puppets so clearly. Pulling strings so all his dolls can dance in perfect timing.

"What more would they want than a woman being overpowered by a man's lust," he beams. "And then your Billy only made it better by casting him off stage. What a show. Went even more perfectly than I

anticipated. I might even sign his band now, make him part of further acts. Amusing." His fingers lift to brush hair from her face, curls a pale lock behind her ear. "What a beautiful scene. Only the beginning of what we could create together. Stunts for the ages. All sorts of scandals."

Patricia pushes his hand from her face, limbs tense with repulsion. Fear unravelling. "Don't."

His expression goes dark at her defiance. "I know what you want, Patricia. I know you want to join me on that pedestal. I know how much you lust to be at the top. You're just as hungry as I am. You wouldn't come this far, debase yourself so eagerly otherwise. I could keep you as my star for a very long time. Provide you with all the resources you need to shine. Your benefactor..." His palm lands on her knee, starts gliding up, up, up. "...and more."

A flash of her dream comes to her. Kitten under a heavy hand, ready to squeeze out tears, strangle.

She's wide awake now.

"No." Patricia slaps him hard across the face. Watches lightless eyes snap open with shock. "Go fuck yourself." She pours her drink in Barry's lap, gets up quick as he gasps with horror.

A shred of fear hits her as his face goes red with rage. Perhaps overly hasty. It's too late though. She's full of adrenaline, rushing towards the door.

"How *dare* you," he seethes, setting his wineglass on the coffee table. Bursting off the couch to follow. "Trash like you should know your place by now!"

Patricia careens down the tiny corridor, hurtles past monstrous statues, heels almost slipping against smooth hardwood. Barry's footsteps behind her but she's already out the door and down the hall. Turns a corner and disappears, descending the closest dark staircase.

She doesn't know where she is now, her boss calling her name in the

distance. Fingers skimming the railing as she makes her way down the circling steps in pitch blackness. Dizzying the way they turn. Her pulse audible, palpitating.

To Patricia's relief the staircase ends at an exit, a backdoor. Opens to a soft night of ink. Pale stars twinkling, pulsing like little heartbeats. Fast as her own now.

*

She escapes the property, heels clacking down the sidewalk, the beat against pavement heady and off-kilter. A payphone miraculously on the same street so she calls a cab home.

A god-awful feeling in the backseat. So alert, body thrumming, yet unable to center or hold onto anything real. She doesn't like how these chemicals interact. Boozy yet too-awake. A manic edge to it all. Feeling crazed.

And ashamed. So fucking ashamed.

She arrives home. Pulls herself into her apartment, relating to nothing. Not this night. Not her body or her life. Everything full of betrayal. No one to trust. Everything a lie.

Billy. Billy is a lie.

Too full. Her body bloated from binging. She collapses over her toilet in the dark, only the dim light from the living room emanating the toilet seat. Fingers curling down her throat, heaving. So excited for the release. That small liberation. Craving that ugly catharsis.

After it's over, her first thought is to keep eating, purge it all up again. Get that release once more. Distract from the agony.

She flushes, rinses her mouth out at the sink. Stares for too long with silent tears at her figure in the dark mirror. Salty wetness jetting from eyes to mouth. A weeping shadow-woman.

The buzzer to her apartment rings.

She knows who it is. Forgot that this place even had a buzzer. Her

last one didn't, being poorly designed and dangerous even before Derek was involved.

Patricia walks over unsteadily, presses the button to speak. Sniffing back all fluids. Knows her mascara must be smeared to hell too, raccoon eyed and pitiful.

"Go away," she mumbles.

Billy's voice comes through, crackling and urgent. "I need to talk to you, Trish."

"I'm finished with hearing you predators talk," she says shakily. "None of you have anything real to say. All you do is manipulate and con. I've had enough."

"Trish--"

She hangs up. The buzzer rings again.

"Leave me alone."

"Look," Billy utters, exasperated. "I'm gonna keep buzzing this thing until you either let me speak my case or call the cops on me. I need to talk to you."

Patricia knows he would, sparks with annoyance inside. Typical man, forcing his way through everything. "I don't think you should see me now." She wipes at her trickling nose, tastes her fuzzy tongue. "I'm not...I'm not myself."

"Please, Trish. Give me ten minutes."

A beat of contemplation that's really just breathing, resting her head against the wall beside the speaker. Too emotionally exhausted to think. Body dull and dead, brain swirling. "Fine."

She buzzes the door open. Retrieves peppermint candy from her purse and grinds it to sticky shards between her teeth before swallowing. A cover up for her bad deed.

A knock at the door. Three gentle raps. She opens slowly.

His horns are still on, but his eyes are anything but devilish. They glitter like he's been crying. Before she can say anything, his brows twitch together, concerned.

"Your nose is bleeding." He steps towards her, hand extending to land on her shoulder.

She swats it away.

"Don't fucking touch me." Patricia wipes the back of her hand over her wet upper lip, sniffing hard. Her fingers are shaking, pull back red. "I'm so fucking sick of everyone touching me."

"I'm sorry..." A gentle tone, filled with worry for her. He puts up both hands, palms exposed, a vulnerable gesture. "Is it alright if I come in?"

"I don't know." She lowers her eyes. "I'm not sober."

"That's okay," he says. "Do you want me to just stand out here? I can stay out here. I just want to talk."

She takes a wobbly step backwards, gesturing inside. Says nothing as she lets him in. He sits down on her couch, bent forward, elbows to knees. A beautiful, brooding Lucifer.

"Take the horns off," she mutters. "They're really not helping your rep."

They come off, placed on the couch cushion next to him. "What are you on right now? Are you okay?"

She doesn't answer. Just stands there, vibrating.

"I'm not gonna judge you, Trish."

"You better not," she snaps. "If there's anyone here that should be judged, it's you."

"That's...totally fair."

"So say your case, and leave, because I don't want you here at all."

He nods sadly. Takes a breath. "First off, I'm sorry. I'm really fucking sorry."

"Yeah, everybody's sorry once they get caught. Way to not tell me straight up when I asked you if you had any weird kinks. Can't believe Nick was telling the truth this whole time about your fucked up fetish."

"It wasn't a kink or a fetish," Billy insists. "It was a game. A really stupid game."

She leans against the wall, arms crossed. Chin high, listening reluctantly.

"I was twenty one and stupid. High on coke twenty-four-seven and could barely hold down a job. I'm not sure how I survived to be honest." He shifts, looks remorseful as he remembers. "Back then, I was a cokehead before I was a drummer or even a friend. I hung out with a lot of burn-outs, but let's just call them what they were: total assholes. Fucking degenerate scumbags and...I was their leader." He puffs out a sigh. "One of them noticed I had dated three blondes in a row. A coincidence. I never cared about hair color much. So we made a bet, a bet that I could nail just blondes for a whole summer. So...I did it. I bragged about it like a total loser, hence the title. Built a reputation I'm not proud of."

Her nails dig into her palms. "God, Billy..."

"It was so dumb. Pathetic." He runs a hand through his hair. "But I don't know that person now. I'm not that guy anymore, Trish."

It's not enough to convince her. "Yeah because when I met you, you were so different than that guy," she fumes. "Give me a break. What about all those blondes at The Whiskey?"

"They came up to *me*. I didn't approach them. I told them I was with you that night. I was stupid-drunk and I still told them I was with you."

She sways with a scoff. "Me, who just happens to be another blonde."

"I went for you because you're beautiful, not because of your hair

color. It's not a fucking fetish, okay?"

Her eyes narrow to slits. "So what about that whole story with the public oral, and sleeping with Nick's girlfriend. Is that true?"

Billy stills for a beat, then sinks into the couch.

"Yeah." His head lowers with shame. "I didn't know they were together. We were barely acquaintances back then. Sort of travelled in the same circles, but didn't really know each other. I only found out after that they had been dating for a few weeks. He said he forgave me. We snorted some lines together and I thought the whole thing was over. But a year later when I actually liked a chick, this girl I dated for...well the longest so far. He slept with her and I fucking hated him for it."

The drama and backstabbing of it all. She can't believe it. "Why would you even be in the same band then?"

"We met up again at the beginning of the year, started jamming casually. Things had cooled down. Called a truce because we all sounded great together. Then the resentment just started building all over again once we moved here." He lets out a breath, rubbing at his temple. "Jesus, the whole thing's so messed up."

"And what about the girl, Billy?" Her bottom lip trembles. "Have you just been buttering me up so you can fuck me over later? Am I next?"

"No, of course not." His eyes pool, oceans of shame. Palms coming together to plead. "I would never do that to you, I-"

"But how could you do it at *all*? Humiliate her like that in public? It's beyond cruel." She stops. "How am I supposed to believe you?"

"You're right. I was a total asshole. I was a terrible fucking person, and that's why I had to get off coke." He shakes his head. "Okay, I'm not gonna blame it on the coke, but it did bring out the absolute worst in me. The people I was around too, we all treated girls like shit, and there's nothing I can do to undo all that. I hate myself for it." A long breath exhales. "I'm explaining this horribly and there's really no justification for it. But that was five fucking years ago,

Trish. By the time we met up, so much about me had changed. I was trying to make a better life for myself, be a better person. And then I met you..." He fades off, meets her with eyes full of deference. "I met you and I knew that I was never going to look back again."

In any other time that would be romantic, now it all feels barren.

"I don't know if I can trust you," she says, distant and weak. Confused, a wave of nausea overcoming her. She bends, sinks hands and knees to the floor to lie on her back. Spreading limbs like a star so she can breathe. "I can't trust anyone anymore..."

"I get it," he rasps. "I get it if you don't trust me. But I will fucking do whatever it takes to earn it back. I swear to god."

Her chest heaves, tears prickling. "I'm coming down on coke," she finally admits, covering her face with cold hands. "Is this what it's supposed to feel like? I thought I would feel something more. I thought there would be this exalted high. A reason for all this bullshit. I feel awful."

Billy lowers downwards, sits on the carpet too. Looking caught between the urge to embrace her and keep the distance she asked him for.

"Why are you all the fucking same?" She digs her hands at her scalp, wrenches at her hair til it stings. "Derek, Mr. Jones, Barry. All those men... touching me while I held my dolls at night. I was fucking four. I was just a little girl. I was just a baby."

She doesn't know where that last part came from. Tears gush as soon as the words leave.

"I don't know what's happening to me," she sobs into her palms. "I don't know what's happening to me. I don't know what's happening to me. I don't know..."

Billy sinks down beside her, touches her shoulder with the lightest pressure. She lets him. Curles into his arms. Weeps into the hard wall of his chest.

He just holds her, encases her in warmth. Lets her break down,

shuddering, her fingers digging into his jacket.

“You didn’t deserve it, Trish,” His voice cracks out. Still keeping her in a fierce yet nurturing hold. “You didn’t deserve it. I could fucking kill them all and you don’t deserve any of this, and I just-” His fingers smooth over the back of her head to cup her crown gently. “I know you don’t trust me. But I’ll prove it to you however long it takes. I’ll never be that guy again, Trish. Ever. ”

She can’t respond. Doesn’t know what to say. They drift silently, but loaded with strain.

“I threw up before you came here,” she says miserably. “I binged and threw up.”

“It’s okay,” he soothes.

She shakes her head violently. “It’s not okay. I’ve been throwing up every day for a month now. Making myself do it, so I can be perfect. Skipping meals so I’d like myself more.” She gasps as more tears drench his bare skin. “I hate myself. I’m disgusting. I’m disgusting.”

“No.” His voice stays firm, won’t let her go there. “No, you’re not. That’s not true. Don’t say that.”

“I’m mean and I do gross things for gross men. I’m a bitch and a whore. I’m only good to fuck.”

“Jesus, no you’re not. You’re not any of those things. You’re Patricia.” He kisses her brow, the center of her forehead. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

It’s not enough. Her voice raises, frantic, close to yelling, burning emotion between rage and grief. “You’re no different than any of them! You were the exact same when we first met. All you wanted to do was fuck me. You were just the same.” She wrenches at his leather jacket, tempted to pound her fists against his chest, push him away. Breaks down again instead. “Why are you all the same?”

He keeps steady as rock, lets her pull at him. “I didn’t only want to sleep with you. I really, truthfully wanted to get to know you and I’m sorry if it came off wrong.”

"Everything was just pussy to you. Tits and ass. That's all I am to anyone."

"No, you're fucking not and I hate that I made you feel that way," Billy murmurs. "I honestly thought I was doing better, but I probably could have been *a lot* better. I'm still learning." He swallows. "And even through all that bullshit, you were so much more to me than just sex, your looks. Even the first night we slept together, I knew you were the one for me. All I wanted to do since then was stay beside you."

She stiffens up. "No, you didn't."

"Yeah. I really did." He goes quiet. She can hear his heart accelerate under her ear. "Trish, I'm in love with -"

"Don't," she moans in despair. "Don't say that now. God, of all the times to say that. Why couldn't you say that when we were happy? Fuck..." She starts whimpering again. Feels hysterical.

A long silence. Unbearable.

Billy finally makes a sound of frustration. "I know it's shitty of me to say that now. You're totally right. I was nervous I was going to scare you away before, but if I don't say it now I'm going to explode." He takes a breath, murmurs out words brimming with reverence. "I care about you more than anyone I've ever met. More than I fucking care about myself. More than my own blood. I've never felt this way about anyone and all I think about is how insanely lucky I am to be with you. How much I want you to be happy, and how when I'm with you, how fucking right it feels, even when it's hard. I love you, Trish. I adore you. So much." His own tears fall to wet her forehead, spill to her mouth. "I'm sorry for who I was. I'm sorry and I know that word doesn't mean much because every other asshole has probably said the same thing to you but it's all I can do right now. So please, just please, give me another chance." He presses lips to her damp cheek. "Please." Kisses her jaw. "I'm sorry."

She stays mute for a while. Has never heard anything more brutally heartfelt. Still doesn't know what's real and what's not. "I don't know if I forgive you yet, but I don't want you to stop holding me either. I

don't want you to let me go." Her words are brittle, but spell surrender. "I don't know how long it will take to forgive any man. I'm angry, Billy. I'm tired. I have nothing left."

"You've got every goddamn reason to be angry. I don't expect you to trust me overnight."

"Good," she says numbly. Tilts her head away from his skin to take a deep breath. Notices then that she's been smearing blood all over his chest. "Oh..."

Billy glances down at the mess, reaches over her towards the coffee table. Grabs tissues and holds them to her nostrils. "Fuck, are you sure it was just cocaine?"

"It's from throwing up. This used to happen a lot in high school. Threw up too hard. All that blood rushing to my head, all that pressure...."

"Shit..."

She takes the tissue from him and pushes it where she's oozing a scarlet pool. Leans against his reddened chest again. "Hold me as tight as you can," she says in the smallest voice. "I want to forget everything. If you hold me tight enough maybe it'll all go away. Sometimes it seems like it will."

He does. Holds her so firmly it nearly cuts off her circulation.

"Yes, like that," she says. "Don't let me go."

He loosens his grip slightly to not suffocate her, but still holds on strong. "I'm not ever going to let you go. Not inside. Not in my heart."

That soaks in so exquisitely.

"If you don't want me to hold you tomorrow," he continues, somber. "I'll understand."

"Just hold me now," she whimpers. "I don't want to think about tomorrow. Just hold me now."

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks for reading, guys.

if this did something for you, please leave a comment down below

thanks for all your support. i'm probably going to be taking a writing break rest of december.

happy holidays xoxo

25. adore

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi y'all, hope everyone's doing alright in these non-stop crazy times. I've been intentionally laying low this month, quietly writing, I think this one's done, though as per usual, I'm not sure if I'm actually done or if I'm just sick and tired of looking at it!!! maybe i need to stop writing these big-ass chapters because i think it's frying my brain.

Also, forgive me if this one is SUPER OVER THE TOP SLOPPY and SELF INDULGENT and CHEESY because in my mind it's like the literary equivalent to the saxophone riff in Careless Whisper everytime i reread it lol. I just...it happened? Maybe I'm overthinking it? Just accept this, thanks.

TW: Mega smut time ahead, big cheese time. an undercurrent of angst. everyone is dumb. thats about it.

Hope you enjoy! <3

Patricia enters Barry's office at MTV Headquarters, head held high despite being terrified.

She didn't forget her knife today.

It's an ornate and dominating room. Typical Barry style. Black and gold. Hard, sleek austerity. She passes a framed picture on the wall of yet another scared blonde in bondage gear. Feels bile rise up her throat at the sight.

He's seated behind his huge desk made of shining dark onyx. Turning to her with a bright expression, as though the Halloween special never happened. Beaming sharp.

"Ah, and here I thought you were never coming back," he says, that

glued-on smile twitching.

Patricia juts her chin out, slides a piece of paper across the gleaming black table and sits down in the unnecessarily large gilded chair in front of her. "It's my resignation letter."

Barry snorts. Chortles a laugh under his breath. "You're joking, right?"

Her jaw clenches before she shrugs. "Nope. As soon as my boss makes a move on me, that's when I call it quits."

He doesn't acknowledge his illicit act, of course, but his demeanour changes.

"You do realize what you're passing on, don't you? And only after a month? Ludicrous." A hint of a snarl emerges on Barry's lips, that smug look disappearing. "I suppose a pretty face doesn't equal a good work ethic. You did always strike me as lazy."

"And you strike me as a total liar and manipulator." She knows exactly how hard she's capable of working. Built her life on that. "It has nothing to do with the amount of effort involved. I'll bust my ass for what I actually care about. I know who I am and what I'm capable of. Live Wire wouldn't exist if I didn't run myself into the ground making it." She stops for a beat. "I just can't work for what I don't believe in."

He changes his strategy then. "You must be insane. The money, the fame. You'll never see it at this level again. There's a line up of girls that would kill to be in your position."

"I'd say hire them instead, but I wouldn't want any woman on earth working for you" she retorts, her eyes blazing. "It was never for me anyways. Working for a manipulative jerk like you was never going to last." She waits for his reaction to that insult, watches his mouth tighten. "Guess we both fucked up."

Barry keeps still, though she can practically see the cogs click in his shiny bald head. Always scheming. "As you wish, Ms. Des Barres."

"I'm going back to writing my magazine," she continues, keeps her

tone casual despite nervously wondering what he'll try next. He's not the kind to topple without a fight. "It'll be just like old times. The *old* Live Wire. The far superior version. Even if I don't have the means to make it nice anymore, even if I have to work at another shitty office job to survive, at least I'll still respect myself.."

Barry just smiles, cheshire-cat grin flashing. Eyes crinkling to slits. "No, not quite, Ms. Des Barres."

She knew something was coming, braces herself.

"You might be a looker, darling, but you sure aren't the brightest blonde in the barrel." He reaches into his desk. Retrieves a cigar from its box and lights it with flair, puffing a white ring towards her. "I do recommend reading contracts thoroughly from now on. You see, when you signed that form, you gave your little magazine over to MTV. Live Wire belongs to me now, dearest." He beams wide and sinister. "All apologies."

Patricia takes a moment to absorb that before a silent rage burns. "You got me drunk that day. Kept filling my glass. All part of the plan, wasn't it?"

He clicks his tongue to chide her as he taps ash into a gold ashtray. "I told you to look it over. You having a penchant for alcoholism isn't my problem."

That cuts but she won't show Barry how much. "Whatever. I can make it without you. It's just a name. Just a title. What people want is *me*." She gets up, chair skidding loud across the marble. "And that's something you'll never have again."

Barry won't let her leave on that note, voice turning to acid. "On the contrary, Ms. Des Barres. What you are is entirely replaceable. You really think I can't find some other vapid slut somewhere else? How stupid of you to think so. All I have to do is walk down the street to find another you."

Patricia adjusts the strap of her purse over her shoulder, expression kept plain despite feeling like her blood is turning to red-black lava. "Guess so. Have fun exploiting. I hope the next girl has the wisdom to

pepper spray you on sight. I hope she can realize how grotesque you are before she begins. Stop before it starts.”

Barry presses his fingers together, that ugly leer ever-present. “If she’s like most women, she won’t do anything until it’s too late.”

The total awareness in that comment makes her stomach heave. Her tongue ties with a thousand insults, none of them hurtful enough. She spins on her heel, heading towards the oak door without another word.

“Wait, dear. I can do more for you.” A subtle pleading in his tone emerges, suddenly desperate. “More cash, is that what you want?”

Patricia stills, her palm on the door handle.

“Bye, Barry.” She offers a cold, wide smile. Slamming the door shut behind her so hard, she can hear his pornographic picture fall off the wall. When the explosion of shattered glass echoes, she imagines the woman behind it free at last.

*

That night, Billy calls her. Three days since their last talk. The first time they’ve spoken since her breakdown.

“Hi,” he crackles on the other end. “It’s Billy.”

No need for him to say who it is. She’d recognize his breathing alone.

“Hi...” she says cautiously, setting down her reading material on the coffee table: *Little Queen*, a feminist metal magazine she found in the downtown music store this morning. Pink cover, brunette in a business suit on the front, giving the viewer a snarl.

“How’s it going?” He seems cautious as she is. “I know I said I’d wait for you to call, but...I couldn’t wait, sorry.”

“I quit the show today,” she says with detached numbness, having not quite absorbed this fact yet. “Though *Live Wire* is gone forever. Barry owns it now.” Saying it aloud solidifies the reality, makes her chest hurt.

“Fuck.” He breathes a sigh that’s somewhere between relief and empathy. “You have no fucking idea how happy I am to hear that.” He pauses, grasping everything she just said. “I mean, obviously not the Live Wire part, that’s fucking terrible-“

“No, I feel it too,” she nods. “This sense of like...freedom. Emptiness. Spaciousness.” She lets out air held in her lungs. “I can breathe again.”

“I’m glad, Trish,” he murmurs with affection. “I’m really glad.” A break of silence. “That’s shitty about your zine though. What a fucking asshole.”

She hasn’t even told him the full story about Barry yet, too emotionally exhausted to spill now. “It’s fine. It’s my fault, signing a contract I didn’t read thoroughly.”

“Still...”

“It’s just a logo,” she assures the both of them, though she feels a tinge of panic. “I’ll think of something new.”

“I’m sure it’ll be even better,” he soothes.

“I hope so.”

A long pause ensues before Billy speaks again. “I know things are still weird between us, but uh... I was wondering if you wanted to do something for your birthday.”

“Oh, shit...” She had actually forgotten. Funny what stress will do. “Not feeling very festive. I’m so tired I could sleep for a hundred years.” Then curiosity hits her. “What did you have in mind?”

He clears his throat. She can sense a touch of sheepishness in him. “I thought maybe we could go to the pier again.”

“I might...be okay with that.” She can barely hide her hesitation. Still hasn’t quite forgiven him yet.

“And I wanted to do something nice for you after, but I’m not sure if you’re going to be into it and-”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I wanted to make you nice dinner, but if that’s weird, I totally get it.”

Her breath catches at the offer, a slight warmth at the thought of him cooking for her. Another part of her feels vulnerable about doing anything involving food. “I’m not sure...”

“It was a dumb idea,” he says quickly, “we can just go to the pier-“

“No, wait. It’s not dumb.” She tries to look at the situation from a more objective viewpoint. Auntie Doris’s view. “Maybe we should do the dinner thing. I think it’s important to like...try to integrate back into normal life again.” She pauses, then speaks with a touch of pride that comes out of nowhere. “I’ve only purged twice since that night.”

The fact that she’s so blunt about it completely takes her off guard. She was never able to speak this way with anyone besides her old therapist from years ago.

“That’s great-“ He breaks off, wavering. “Wait, what’s the best way for me to respond to that? I want to do things the right way...”

The boy-like need to please in his tone melts a layer of steel encasing her heart. “How about...” She takes a moment to think, not even sure herself. “...good job? Can’t go wrong with that.”

“Good job, Trish.” His words feel like a caress down her spine, genuinely comforting.

“Billy, I...” She fades off. The urge to hold him now overwhelming, threatening to overpower her fortress of ice and steel.

“Yeah?”

“I...” She paints a pattern on her coffee table with her forefinger. “I know you’re better than you used to be. A lot better. I know that in my heart.”

“You do?”

"Yeah," She straightens her spine. Takes a breath. "-but still. These things take time."

"I know," he murmurs. "Like I said, I don't expect instant trust. I'm just glad you're talking to me."

"And I don't expect you to be perfect either."

"I'm just aiming to be way better than before," he confesses. "I want to eclipse the old me."

"Same," she breathes. "I want to get better, Billy. For real this time."

*

On the sixth of November, Billy picks her up to take her to the pier as promised. The night cooler than their first date there. The sun beginning to set just like before, just as effervescent, just as beautiful. They walk the pier together, a foot apart again. That same tension of not-touching constantly in her awareness.

So much has happened since the last time they were here. So much has died.

Yet, there's a feeling of newness in the salty air.

"I'm still weirded out that I missed your birthday back in August," Patricia bites into pink cotton candy, spun sugar dissolving on her tongue. "You turned a whole year older and I didn't know."

"Yeah." He leans to bite into air-like sweetness, licks his lips. Her eyes linger on his cupid's bow. "But that's when we were having...an intermission of sorts."

Patricia realizes she's staring so she keeps her gaze away from the pretty parts of him, which is...actually impossible so she settles her eyes on the dusky orange horizon instead. "What did you do that day?"

"Spent time with a girl I didn't care about. Thought about you the whole night. It was pretty depressing actually, that entire period." He brushes past her fingers to steal more cotton candy from her. The first

time they've touched since Halloween. That familiar spark instantly ignited. "Pined for a whole month over you. Like some sad-ass poet but without the poems. Though I did write like five drum solos with you in mind."

She laughs, knees turning to jelly from that confession. "I didn't know that."

"It was way too fucking pathetic for me to ever admit." His tease of a grin tempts her to yank him closer.

It's all a re-emergence of their beginning. The electric atmosphere, the buoyant crowds, the technicolor sights and sounds. They pass by the same games stand again, Patricia about to retrieve a gun to shoot at plastic ducks. Billy stops her.

"Nah," he shakes his head firmly. "I promised myself I'd win a prize for you tonight."

He pulls her over to a game he says is much more up his alley: the mini-basketball hoop.

"Used to play back in highschool," He grabs a ball from an attendant and turns towards the board.

She laughs at the tiny sphere dwarfed by his big hands. "Aw, were you a miniature basketball star?"

Billy shoots her a sardonic look. "You know what I mean." He aims and the ball goes in with a satisfying *swoosh*. He picks up the next ball and does it again. And again. And again.

She nudges him playfully after he does the same with four more baskets. Impressed but not surprised. "You're pretty good at that, sporty."

"They didn't make me point guard for nothing." Billy smirks as he hands her his prize: a giant bundle of floating pink balloons. People pass by them, smiling at her and the dozen or so fluorescent orbs bobbing over her head, now matching the color of her face.

She rolls her eyes as Billy begins tying the connecting red ribbon

around her wrist. "I'm not five years old."

He flicks the balloon closest to her head, a flirtatious glint in his eye. "Losing these is really bad for the environment, you know." He finishes his handiwork, though his touch lingers a bit too long at the underside of her wrist. The calloused brush of his fingers on the delicate skin feels stunningly intimate. Stirring the same old feelings. Made all the more potent by the promise she made to herself in the mirror right before he picked her up tonight: *this time I won't cave so easily*.

Good luck with that. She can't even last a day without wanting him. Craving him like parched earth craves water. An absolute failure at being detached. Once she let her guard down with him, putting that wall back up is far more difficult than it used to be, no matter what illicit secrets have been spilled. Everything he does affects her now.

Though, maybe it was always profoundly difficult to be unaffected by Billy.

Then, to her abundant protest, he buys her a bouquet of pink roses from the nearest flower vendor. She eventually relents and surrenders to their sweet aroma, the petals sleek and soft against her fingertips, the clear, glossy plastic surrounding the stems reflecting the surrounding neon.

The ferris wheel comes next. To her, it's the biggest reminder of their beginning. Full of nostalgia.

As the attendant locks them into their seat and they begin to rise up, Patricia doesn't know what what to feel anymore. The ocean sparkling with moon-glow in the distance. Her one arm curled around her bouquet of flowers, bubblegum-bright balloons floating up from the other. A beautiful man, calm and collected by her side, who she can't stop stealing looks at. Butterflies spiralling in her stomach because nothing has changed at all.

As if the night couldn't get more sentimental, the loudspeakers start playing that old Rolling Stones song: *she's like a rainbow, she comes in colors everywhere, she combs her hair*. Billy's face lights up in response, memories sparking of him singing that to her in post-coital bliss.

Her brain is glitching out, but if she had to put words to this moment...

Protected. Held.

Better than a dream.

Now no longer under the influence of cocaine or alcohol or paranoid fear, the emotions she's been forming for him over the past months emerge rapidly, easy as breathing. The desire to be close to him, be encased by his strength pulling at her.

He's just so....solid.

The wheel reaches the pinnacle, grazing the night sky. Kissing starlight. Patricia can't help herself. She quickly presses her lips to his cheek.

Billy responds with a flicker of a smile, entwining his warm fingers through hers. She leans on his shoulder and there's no pressure to push it further. He simply gives her the silent comfort of his presence, as steady and consistent as ocean waves returning to shore.

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"I was going to do this by myself for you," Billy frowns, watching as Patricia minces garlic on a wooden cutting board. Her kitchen, despite being high-end, is still rather small. Forcing them to hover near each other. "Kinda the point, right? Birthday girl should just kick back and relax." He casually puts a hand on her lower back to move past her. She burns up instantly on contact.

Patricia forces herself to not think about his touch. A near-impossible feat. She's been getting increasingly hungry in more ways than one since they first met up today. "This just seems important. I need to start really making food properly again. Healthy meals and stuff. Get grounded. Making food helps with my mental health."

Billy's eyes soften. "Well, when you put it that way...guess you can stick around." He leans in like he's about to kiss her but grabs a pot hanging by her head instead. Leaves her feeling winded.

This night is quickly becoming sweet torture.

Thankfully, the sweetness overrides the agony.

Chopping veggies together for a salad, she begins to relax. Something so simple but enjoyable, these minor things that bring people together, bring her into the present and able to forget. It's surreal how close she feels with Billy now, even without touching, how easy it is to meld into each other's presence and slip into what Auntie Doris would call a "zen state."

Her general anxiety about life is dulled dramatically too. Having quit Live Wire seems to have unloaded a ton of weight off her shoulders. Just like that, she's at a much more manageable baseline, fear and horror a distant background noise. Not living, hissing, squirming in her solar plexus at all times.

She smiles to herself, watching as Billy tastes Alfredo sauce, holding the spoon out for her to try. His other hand cupping underneath for drips it as she tastes.

"More salt," she advises. He nods and obeys.

Real intimacy. She had forgotten how important these small moments are. Forgotten what really mattered amongst the glitz and glamour of it all, the constant worry about food and her body and people's perceptions of it.

All she wants are these moments now, these glimpses of the mundane. Treasuring, hoarding little snapshots of peace.

Before they sit down to eat, Billy manages to find candles in some bottom drawer of her apartment. Small tea lights that he carefully arranges in the center of the dining table.

It's touching how much he attends to the little details. The feeling of care permeates everything.

He fiddles with the knob on her radio then, finds some slow soft rock station playing Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes". One of her favourites though she always thought the over-the-top passion and love depicted in it could never happen in real life. At least, not to her.

In your eyes, the light, the heat

In your eyes, I am complete

I see the doorway to a thousand churches

The resolution of all the fruitless searches

For the first time, the lyrics send chills up her spine. She can't look at Billy while it's playing either. She tries not to think too hard about that, but her pulse pounds.

The meal is delicious, reminds her so much of Auntie' Doris's home-cooking. Noodles simmered to perfection, sauce creamy and flavorful. Salad light and crisp. A slice of sweet strawberry cake that he showed up with when he arrived at the door. Most delicious of all is how she's able to eat without worrying about what Billy thinks of her. Well, mostly. The thought does cross her mind momentarily when the plates are cleared away. Still remarkably better than even a week ago.

After Billy clears and cleans the dishes, they lie down on the couch to watch tv together. A foot apart. Not cuddling, though every cell in her body wants to and doesn't know why she's resisting. A part of her trying to prove a point. The television fills the room with a bluish glow, showing live footage of The Monterey Pop Festival from the sixties. Music overlaying the images of festival-goers with a familiar tune Ma used to sing to her when she was stoned: *If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear flowers in your hair.*

She can't remember if she went to this particular festival or not. Her eyes scan the screen. Seeking a small, emaciated child, big blue eyes looking for a hand to hold in the crowd.

She glances down at Billy's hand on the couch cushion, stomach clenching with the desire to bring it to her cheek.

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Eventually, due to the furnace warmth of Billy emanating into her and not having a good night's sleep in weeks, Patricia's eyes flutter closed. She tells him she's just going to rest her eyes and lightly dozes

off next to him.

It's hard to tell how much time has passed when Patricia hears water running. She blinks eyes to focus. Realizes she's now cuddled into the corner of the sofa, a throw blanket draped over her.

She glances over at his side of the couch, now empty. She gets up with a stretch and pads over to the bathroom, where the door is cracked open, low light streaming through.

Her brows crease in confusion. "Whatcha doin' there, bud? "She opens the door fully and is hit by a wall of steam, then the glow of candlelight, the room taken up by a dreamy incandescence.

Billy is half-cast in ethereal glow, kneeling beside the clawfoot bathtub. Pouring her bubble bath solution into the tub. "Nothing..."

She crosses her arms, leans against the doorframe, a little stunned. "Billy, you really didn't have to."

"I'm glad you woke up, thought you might have passed out for the night." He pulls up one of the creamy pink roses he gifted. Tilts it to her. "I'm gonna sacrifice this one. Sorry." Petals tear. Scatter like confetti onto sparkling, frothing bubbles.

Patricia steps forward, a slight smile pulling at her lips. An unstoppable thrill of delight in her belly. "This is just an excuse to get me naked."

Billy gets off his knees, shrugs with casual nonchalance. "I was actually gonna head out. Work in the morning, remember? But I thought I'd make it for you. A last parting gift." He rubs her arm as he passes her. Stops at the door handle, gives her a hopeful glance. "Hug before I leave?"

A feeling of total loss overcomes at the thought of him leaving her here all alone. At how it's up in the air whether she even wants to be hugged or not. Her mouth opens and closes as she flounders for something to say. "But...you can't go now..."

He pauses, eyebrow raising at the anguish in her voice. "No?"

She realizes how desperate she seems, covers it with a skeptical look. Though her heart is skipping, butterflies swarming up into her throat. "This is such a ruse."

"Not everything is a ruse, Trish," he says slowly, eyes unwavering. "Not everyone has an agenda. At least, I don't."

She sits on the side of the tub, sinks her hand into warm bubbles. Peeks at him through her lashes. "Are you sure you can't stay for a bit longer? For my birthday?" The sentence hangs, loaded with need despite her every intention for it to somehow be breezy.

"You mean, get in with you?" He looks at the filling tub, then at her, raising a quizzical brow.

"...yes."

Billy stills for a moment. "You know I'm not going to turn you down."

She swallows, words coming out fragile. "Please stay."

"Alright." Billy's hand drops from the door handle. His warm gaze turns her inside out, leaves her all exposed, belly-up and vulnerable from the relentless heat and magic between them. "I'll stay."

All her pretence dissolves at his surrender. She crosses the room to hug him fiercely. He hugs her back just as strong, arms wrapping around her as he kisses the top of her head.

She pulls back then. Starts to undress slowly, fabric falling to the floor. Their gazes locked. There's something brutally erotic about it, how pulled into this moment they both are. He follows suit, baring bronzed skin, taut muscle, and something...deeper. Far deeper, the way he's looking at her now. Beyond simple sexual arousal. Something that yearns for her endlessly. An eternity of desire.

"You go first." She gestures to the water, glancing away because she can't handle this level of depth right now.

"Okay." Billy steps in the tub, candlelight dancing over his skin. He hisses slightly. "It's hot." He sinks down anyways. "Not for sissies."

“Is this a feat of strength?”

“Absolutely.” He sinks into bubbles with a sigh, dips his head back. “Come on, get in.”

Her toe touches the water. “Shit, it is hot.” She lowers slowly, letting her body adjust to the near-boiling temperature. Instead of sitting on the opposite end of the tub, she finds herself settling down into his lap, bottom nestling between his legs.

A low grunt in her ear. “Watch the goods, sweetheart.”

“Sorry.” She leans back into him with a small groan, her muscles melting from the heat. Fragrant vanilla bubbles popping luxuriously. “Well, this is nice.”

“Yeah,” He slowly wraps an arm around her, shifts beneath to find better positioning. “Gotta say, glad it ended up this way.”

“Me too.” She bites her tongue behind a smile. Holds back from saying this was part of his plan.

After some moments pass, he murmurs in her ear. “Can I kiss you?”

Her resolve breaks even more. She turn her head to meet his mouth. He starts off soft and languid but she’s the one that turns it into something passionate, ardent. Slipping her tongue past his lips with a desperation that she didn’t know she had.

He pulls back slightly, chuckling under his breath when her kisses threaten to devour him. “I thought you wanted to take things slow...”

“I think we both failed at that when we got naked in a tub together?”

“Point taken.” A grin tugs at his lips but his voice turns a shade serious. “Do you think we should take things slow anyways?”

She pauses mid-kiss. “Why?” It’s too late for slow now. At least, her libido thinks so.

“Because what happened the other night was a big deal. And... sometimes we do dumb shit when we’re horny. I don’t want you to

do stuff and then resent me later.”

“I’m not going to resent you,” she promises. Then pauses because there is an element of truth there. “Okay, I *did* resent you the night of The Halloween Special...and maybe also for a few days after.” She stops again. “Alright, I pretty much resented you until you picked me up tonight.”

He exhales a heavy breath. “Yeah, that’s exactly why I’m hesitant, Trish. Maybe it’s too soon.”

Patricia frowns, wants to shove past all hesitation so she can satisfy her primal urges. She leans into him. “Now I’m sad.”

He pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. “Am I being a downer?”

She nods, “A downer with good points but a downer nonetheless.”

“Sorry. I just... don’t want to fuck this up even more.”

“Am I-I’m doing the mixed messages thing again, aren’t I?”

“Hell, *I’m* doing the mixed messages thing.” He gestures to himself sitting in her tub. “It’s a fucking confusing situation, I guess.”

She lowers deeper into warm bubbles, clasps her hands on his big knees. “What do you want from tonight?”

“You,” he sighs. “Obviously, you. But I wanna try to do this right.” He strokes knuckles down her sleek skin. “What do *you* want?”

“Honestly?” She presses her lips together and then grins. “Birthday sex.”

He laughs huskily at that. “You know, I was expecting you to not even speak to me for like a month. I wasn’t sure you’d let me take you out let alone get through your door.” A pause, subtle shift in his tone. “Turns out you’re a horny little thing...”

She feels his cock hardening against her back, writhes against him. “So are you.”

"Humans are such simple creatures," he muses, settling back against the side of the tub with a stretch.

"I can't believe how cerebral you are right now." Usually he's much more hands-on. It's a bit infuriating.

"Layers, baby. I got em." Then the slippery skin of his arm wraps tighter around her. "You're sort of the seductress right now. I should be seducing *you*." His fingers travel down through soapy bubbles, meet the v of trimmed hair between her legs. She bites her lip when he caresses her aching flesh, now getting slicker every second.

She's burning alive. Fire under water, erupting to the surface to incinerate.

"I want you." It's all she can say, grinding slightly against the hard length behind her. "Fuck, I want you." She twists to face him, her wet hands clasp his face, pulling him in for a more thorough kiss. That gnawing hunger insatiable after nearly a week apart. Apparently far too long for her.

"Who knew a bath would turn you on so much," he mutters between kisses. "I shoulda done this months ago."

She shuts him up with her mouth. "Fuck me. Please fuck me."

He slows down then, pulling back to pout. "I'm not gonna just *fuck* you. It's your birthday. It should be special."

"You mean...you wanna make love?"

"Maybe," he answers lightly, his eyes suggestive. "Come on, time's up. The water's cold." He makes a motion to get out.

Her brows pinch together at that last statement, the bathwater on her skin still close to scalding. "We've been in here for like, not even ten minutes."

"Bedtime." He ignores her with a mischievous chuckle. "Time for me to tuck you in, princess." His body emerges from the bubbles, forcing her to get up.

Soon, Patricia's standing on the bathmat, being dried by a big fluffy white towel. Feeling utterly babied. Maybe too much. Her own mother never treated her with this kind of gentleness, this care.

Then a moment later, she's literally swept off her feet, towel dropping to the floor.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she squeals as he carries her wedding-style, her limbs flailing in a futile attempt to escape from his strong grip. "Billy!"

He snickers low at her whining. "It's called romance, Trish. Damn." He holds her tighter to his naked, warm-wet body as they journey into the hallway. "Jesus, you're like a fucking eel. Stop squirming."

"You're dripping all over my floorboards!" She gestures in dismay at the pool-like trail behind them. Imagines the wooden boards warping, fading, costing her hundreds. "They'll get water damage! My landlord-"

"I'll pay for them." He shrugs off her frustration, lightly kicking her bedroom door open. "Shit, I'll re-install them myself. I don't care."

"Billy," She gives him a serious look. "I mean it."

His grin fades when he sees her genuine distress. He comes to a halt, glancing at the the water-logged floor behind him, shifting her weight in his arms.

"Alright, birthday girl." He swallows his pride with a lighthearted sigh. "I'll dry m'lady's floors." He deposits her onto the bed. Gently pressing her into it with a forehead kiss. A perfect gentleman until he murmurs, grinning: "I know you're horny as hell, but try not to rub one out while I'm gone."

He ducks before she can smush a pillow in his face. Another hits him in the shoulder as he backs away with that boyish grin. He escapes the room, chuckling.

When he returns and slips under the covers, their bodies seal together like magnets. An electric relief to be skin on skin in bed again, both a familiar comfort and still wildly exciting.

Billy kisses a trail of lip and tongue down her throat, her chest. "So what do you want tonight, birthday girl?" He nuzzles into her neck, his skin hot, his damp hair brushing her cheek. "I could go down on you. Eat you out for an hour." His tone promises that's not an exaggeration. "Would you like that?"

"That would be nice..." She's breathing heavy, all four limbs tight around him, the desire to be filled to the brim overwhelming.

"Or I could massage you. Fuck you nice and slow after."

She's getting wetter with every suggestion. "That's sounds amazing."

"Or all of the above," he says with a wicked look in his eye.

She brushes her lips against his. "I thought you had to work tomorrow."

"Yeah, I prioritize hot sex with you over work any day," he snorts. "I'll survive a shitty morning."

"I kind of want do something else," she says carefully, a completely different image emerging in her mind. Something she's never done before, that he's done to her. Something he might totally object to.

He takes her hand to nip at her fingers. Sucks gently on her index. "Feeling experimental, are we?"

She brings up something she's been secretly fantasizing about for weeks. Touching herself to the imagery. Feeling ashamed for wanting it. "I want to...tie you up."

A pause that's hard to read. "You do?"

"This isn't like punishment for what happened when...you know." She drifts off at the memory of her having a breakdown, the main reason for her guilt. If that night left her bawling on the bathroom tile, why would she keep fantasizing about the reversal?

"Punishment isn't the first thing that came to mind, though I don't mind being punished in that way." He gives her a sly look. "I kinda get why you want to do this though..."

"I just want to be in charge tonight." She laughs under her breath. "What is wrong with me? Wouldn't a normal girl just want to be a pillow princess for her birthday?"

"Let's not put things in terms of normal and not normal. Just-what you like and don't like." He nudges her, eyebrows wiggling. "So, what do you want to tie me up with? A leather belt? Medieval chains?"

"You're so eager," she teases. "Have you done this before?"

"Once or twice," he shrugs. "I don't mind it. Kinda like it actually, though it is fucking frustrating as much as it's hot."

"Hah. So you know how it feels."

"I'll admit, I'm a bratty bottom," He grins wide because she's cackling at that statement. "What? I mean, I'm probably always going to feel more at home on top, leading the situation. But I don't mind switching things up." He looks her up and down, sparks glowing behind his eyes. "Something tells me you're going to be pretty good at leading the situation. Think I'm in for a real treat."

"Me too," she smiles, feeling itchy with anticipation.

"Though, I really was expecting to worship you with my tongue," he sighs with a touch of drama. "Treat you like a queen."

She elbows him lightly. "You do that all the time, anyways."

"Fucking true."

She gets up to look for the same two scarves Billy had used on her. When she sits back down next to him, she summons the courage to admit her full fantasy. "I want to blindfold you too."

Yet again, it's difficult to read his expression so she stiffens up with shame.

He blinks, more in surprise than judgement, then blows out a puff of air. "Alright, let's get freaky." A wild grin emerges on his lips then, makes her relieved. A part of her was wondering if he was going to

turn her down, question her desires.

Derek always wanted her to be submissive. Didn't like her being in control. Ever.

She shuffles closer tentatively. "Are you ready?"

There's a crackle of erotic tension in the air as he nods in response. The electric current of anticipation humming off his body. His arms go up over his head so she can tie him to the bed frame, his hips undulating slightly. His cock hard and thick, tight against his lower abdomen. Dripping wet at the tip for her.

She can't wait to taste it.

She leans to tie his hands together, her breasts dangling over his head as she straddles him. Her golden hair cascading to brush his cheek. She feels his tongue steal upwards to streak across her nipple, latch on to suckle as she attempts to tie him up firmly. "You're distracting me."

"Like I have any self control with your perfect fucking titties in my face," he grunts with caveman desire, nipping the tip of her breast. Then, to her complete amusement, when she moves her chest away, he makes a petulant groaning sound. "Don't judge, Trish, but this is already driving me bonkers. Safe word is *get me the fuck outta here*."

"Don't be such a baby, we haven't even started yet." she chides him. "There." She sits back on her heels, gets a singe of longing throughout her body at the vision of him. His muscles flexing over his head. The beautiful shape of his torso.

She raises the other scarf to blindfold him. That starry fabric catching light as she ties a knot behind his head. He bites his bottom lip, a tinge of anxiety in the motion.

She leans to whisper, "Don't be scared." Her thighs tighten on either side of his hips.

A wicked chuckle rasps against her ear. "Does my dick seem scared to you?" He thrusts up against her, the tip of his cock grazing her vulva.

“You really are a bratty bottom,” Patricia half-laughs though the other part of her is overcome with want. She kisses him long and hard and sweet. Soft tongues gliding before she pulls back to look at him again. Thoroughly.

And there, as her gaze hungrily licks across him, she realizes how powerful this is. To gaze at his body and feel that same heat that he feels for her, unashamed and lusty. To flip the dynamic on it's head. Swallow him up with her need for him and him being unable to do anything about it.

It's more intense than she expected. Gratifying too.

There he is, completely at her mercy. Hard, ardent, helpless.

And all she wants to do is please him.

Slowly.

“I'm very close to tapping out,” he murmurs coyly. “All I wanna do is touch you.”

“You will,” She presses her thumb to his lip. Lets him lick and tease the pad of flesh before she gently pushes it into his mouth. He melts into the act, sensually sucking at her finger with obscene attention because it's all he can do.

She kisses a trail down his stomach next. Caresses his cock between her fingers. Hears his breathing deepen as she licks a circle around the salty tip. Hears him stop breathing when she swallows him down to her throat. She watches him as she sucks, takes the time now to absorb him all without any shame.

It's weird to think there was any shame before, being so promiscuous before this.

The shame of being a woman, wanting a man just as much as he wants her. There's no one here to watch her watching him, not even in her own head. Not right now.

Right now, it's just her. Free to gaze and touch and tease as she pleases.

The freedom is overwhelmingly erotic.

She needs him. Deep.

She poises herself over his throbbing cock and runs the head of him over her opening, her clit. Coating him with her nectar til he's writhing.

"*Holy shit*," he mutters. "Trish..."

Then she sinks down agonizingly slow. Inch by excruciating inch. And it must be excruciating because he's already pulling at his bonds.

"Fuck, sweetheart," he pants. "That's so good."

"I'm not doing anything." She's perfectly still now. "Yet." She tightens herself as hard as she can around him to make him groan.

"God...everything you do feels so...heightened," he swallows, mouth parting. "And even though I'm blindfolded, I can see you in my mind so clearly. So clear..."

"Where are you right now?" She asks, curious. "What do you see?"

"I see you," He wets his lips, "and you're covered in stardust."

So is he. Candlelight reflecting off embroidered gold and silver of his bondings, the glimmering fabric around his eyes. His body, still shiny from oily bathwater gleaming too.

"But in my mind, you *always* are," he continues, more euphoric. Poetic, like there's a type of verbal freedom from his bonds, his blindness. "In my dreams too. You're always naked and beautiful and covered in stars...think you rose up outta the ocean like Venus. But not in the day. You rose up at night. Like...a star goddess. And you glow brighter than the fucking moon..."

That unexpected prose catapults her into a new level of arousal. She moves her hips finally. Takes him the same way he likes to take her. Passionate and on the verge of torture. Watching his expressions, now looking almost pained by her slow seduction.

“Come on, ride me, baby,” he pleads. “Fuck me.”

Funny how the roles reverse. “How about just the tip?” she coos. Goes back up and sinks down just an inch or two. Gyrates right at the edge.

“Mm. No, not enough. Please, Trish.” He grinds his hips up. Desperate. Uses his heels to dig up into her.

“Don’t try to take control now,” she hums. “I’m fucking *you*, remember?”

“Tease. You know I’ll get you for this later, “ he purrs right back, but it’s soon drowned out by a deep moan as she sinks to the hilt, the movement so pleasurable, they both groan.

“Yeah, like that,” he rasps as she starts to bounce on him. “Fuck. Just like that.” He tugs at the ties that bind, grinds his hips into her helplessly, unable to stop himself from thrusting hard into her.

She has as little self control as he does now. Her body screaming for an orgasm. She reaches down and circles her clit. Gets focused on her approaching sparks, slowing down to rock her hips, and easily crosses over into cathartic release. Tensing and twitching, the sounds emerging from her throat spasmodic and desperate. A starlit ocean behind her eyes.

“God, yeah, can feel you fucking come, baby.” Billy grunts. “Jesus, you feel so good. Fuck, I’m gonna-“ He spills in her then with a hoarse moan, much more vocal than usual. Easier to let go in the darkness, in a different world.

When they’re both completely finished, she leans down to rest her head on his chest, feeling obliterated. Swears she can feel the sea rising around her, surrounding them in salty warmth.

“Wanna hold you.” He pulls at his bonds. “Please, Trish. I need to touch you.”

She slowly takes him out of her, feels his come trickle down her inner thigh as she unties him. Unblinds him. Kissing him all the while. When released, his hands smooth warm and strong down her back.

Cup her face, run through her hair.

“You’re too fucking beautiful,” he says before pulling her even closer. Rolling them so he lays on top her. Minutes later, he’s inside her again, this time fucking her nice and slow, just like he said would. That urgency replaced by a languid heat that can burn forever.

After round two, she’s riding high, soaring on creamy-white clouds, pleasantly crushed under him. He keeps still within her, doesn’t pull out until he goes completely soft.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” he murmurs at her ear, gently kissing the hummingbird pulse at her neck.

For some reason, she’s tearing up. She gives him a slight squeeze around his shoulders “It’s been one of my better ones. Maybe the best.”

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Later, she lounges in a state of total peace next to him, happily naked, eating the cotton candy they didn’t finish. Now that their positions are curled into something less needy, more comfortable, she musters up the strength to ask something she’s been fretting about for awhile.

“Billy, what are you doing for Thanksgiving?”

He scratches his chin, expression going bleak. “Uh...I was going to go see my dad and his fucked up side of the family. Unfortunately, it’s his turn hosting the gong show this year..”

She clams up, doesn’t want to intrude. “Oh. Okay.”

“Why?” He stirs lazily to look at her. “What are you doing?”

“Well, Auntie Doris always has this nice dinner,” she says lightly. “She’s a really good cook.”

“Sounds cool.” They drift off to silence again.

“Do you think...” She licks sugar off her lips. “Do you think you’d

like to come with me?"

He freezes, seems surprised. "Huh. No chick's ever asked me over for Thanksgiving before."

"I think you should come." She pauses. "If you want."

Billy goes quiet for a beat. "My dad would be pissed. He's super into family tradition." He clicks his tongue sardonically. "Or was that fascism? Can't remember."

That all sounds far more raw, more truthful than it should be. She doesn't want to let him anywhere *near* that man.

"You can say that things have gotten more serious and it's time to do the *traditional* thing of seeing your girlfriend's family." She frowns. "Well, what's left of it."

"Girlfriend." He lingers on that word. "So does this mean...you trust me?" He looks at her with hopeful eyes.

She takes a breath, knowing where she stands now. Pretty easy to after all that's happened today. "I'm willing to accept that what happened, happened a long time ago. It'd be wrong to hold your past against you forever, when you've been so good to me these past months."

"So that means...?"

She realizes then what he's asking her for. "I forgive you. I want you to come over for Thanksgiving and I forgive you."

"Sweet." His fingers tighten around hers, his eyes softening with gratitude. "Guess my dad'll just have to wait til Christmas then."

She burrows her face in his chest. "I'm excited for you to meet Auntie Doris. I just know you'll like her. And her home...it's like paradise."

"That sounds amazing, though anything is paradise compared to a Hargrove Thanksgiving" His brows twitch together as he mulls. "Hey, I just thought of something."

“What?”

“Well, usually I take the week off for Thanksgiving. Go out to Malibu before heading up to San Diego. My uncle’s gotta cabin on the beach out there. I just chill with him, hang out and surf a whole bunch to get my mind off whatever shit-show inevitably happens.” There’s so much weight to every vague description of his family, a heaviness that’s painful just to hear about. She’s more than happy to take him away from that. “You don’t work right now, right? Why don’t we go out to Malibu together first?”

“Yes!” All her cells light up. Hanging out at a cabin on the beach with Billy, *without* a giant, fucked up metal party involved sounds like heaven. “Let’s do it.”

“Hell yeah,” He stretches out all his limbs with a happy groan. “You have no idea, Trish. It’s surfer’s dream out there. We’ll surf all day....”

“Fuck all night?” she says innocently.

He makes a face of mock offense before grinning. “I was gonna say roll around in the sand, but we can do that too.”

“I like both.” She hugs him close, nuzzles into his torso, affection pouring off of her. “I honestly can’t wait.”

There’s a contented stretch of silence. Then he turns to her, eyes sparkling with a thoughtless, natural adoration that she’s never witnessed in any man besides him.

It elicits the fragile vulnerability of being too seen. A feeling of panic, of *I don’t deserve this*.

“I love you, Trish” he says softly, planting her hand on his chest.

It’s like being caught in a head on collision. So much sharper now than hearing it when she was dulled by wine and white powder.

All her relaxed muscles stiffen to brick. Way too long of a silence follows. Her heart backflipping, palpitating, mouth stripped to dust. All she can think of is Derek fucking her painfully into the couch

while she said those exact same words to him so foolishly. So reckless with her heart.

She's not being foolish again, is she?

"You don't have to say it back." Billy's lips skim her jawline, and unlike Derek, there's a reverence in his tone. "I just can't help but say it. It feels good. Feels right."

But she's still afraid, cautious. Her fingers glide down his arm as she kisses his cheek, an apology in her touch. She can sense his heart sinking despite his reassurance.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, feeling cruel. Why was it so easy to say it back to Derek—who obviously had no comprehension of real love—when the man she cares about is offering it wholeheartedly, his chest slit open to bleed for her?

Her mind churns, an undeniable hysteria in it. The logical part of her brain saying that it's simply too much, too soon. He shouldn't expect her to say it back this fast—

But maybe it was easier when it *wasn't* real. As flippant as *Mama loves you, Patty-baby*. Barely any meaning attached to it. Maybe it was easier when the word had no weight, no consequences—

"It's fine." Billy kisses her fingers, eyes lowered. "I can't expect stuff when I say shit like that. I don't want to expect anything." He shrugs it off even though his expression spells something more torn.

He shifts away slightly, rubs at tired eyes with the heels of his palms. Glances at her alarm clock and sighs heavily.

"Fuck, it's nearly two," he murmurs. "I should probably go."

Remorse rises up her throat, like cement lodged there, cutting off all oxygen. "Billy..."

"It's not what you think." He squeezes her to his warm chest but she feels cold. Confused. "I gotta be up early," he explains. "Didn't bring any of my work shit over."

“You usually do,” she says sadly.

“Like I said, I wasn’t even sure if you’d even let me into your place again. Not for awhile.”

She touches his arm, curls her fingers over his shoulder. “I’d really like it if you stayed.”

Teeth bite at his lower lip, hesitating.

“Please stay.” She noses her way under his arm again, so she can wrap all her limbs around him. Keep him trapped in a vice. “I’ll get up with you. Make you breakfast. Please.”

Billy lets out a long breath. “Okay.” He groans before playfully rolling her onto her back again. “Can’t say no to the birthday girl.” He slowly sews little kisses all over her face and neck. “Can’t seem to say no to you ever, really.”

She pulls him closer, guiltily mulling over his last sentence, wondering if it’s for better or for worse.

Notes for the Chapter:

okay, on to the next self indulgent smutty, slightly angsty, chapter.

(one day I'll realize it's okay to be self indulgent in fanfiction)

thanks for reading. if this chapter moves you, please comment down below or on my tumblr!

26. malibu

Notes for the Chapter:

hey ya'll! :)

so. this chapter is super fluffy, smutty and probably self indulgent filler. but it's filler i enjoyed writing and thats all that matters!

enjoy it while it lasts!

Malibu is gorgeous beyond belief.

Patricia's been here before as a child. Her mother took her to a few rockstar-studded parties that she was far too young to witness, and though they aren't exactly great memories, there's something *new* about coming here with Billy. On the hour-long drive out here it's as if sea and sky are purposefully shining for them only.

They arrive at his uncle's cabin at sunset, and despite its dilapidated wood and cheap hippie prayer-flags on the wind, the fact that he has access to property on a beach this unaffordable is extremely lucky. It's been a family heirloom for decades.

They exit the Camaro, taking in the stunning view visible from here. Billy leans against the car to watch perfect waves crashing towards the shore, sunlight dark pink and low on the horizon.

"Damn." He turns to look at her and melts her with a grin. "I can't believe you're actually here with me."

She returns his smile and opens the Camaro's trunk. "I hope your uncle is okay with random girls showing up."

Billy chuckles. "Are you kidding? When he sees you he's gonna fucking flip." He reaches in the backseat, heaving their food supplies into his arms before adding, "He's not gonna hang around by the way. We get the upstairs suite. He's the basement dweller."

"It's his house. Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

“Nah, he likes to stay low to the ground. Good to be near the earth, is what he says. Helps his center of gravity or something.”

“I kind of had a feeling he was going to be total hippie.” She nods towards the van in the driveway, lemon yellow with a big violet peace sign painted on its flank, a Grateful Dead sticker pasted lovingly on the back windshield.

“This shit’s the real California, baby. Never let those Hollywood yuppie assholes fool you.”

“I’m aware,” Patricia assures, having experienced that psychedelic whirlwind since birth. “Guess you were living in San Francisco for awhile. You’ve probably seen the whole gamut of hippie culture.”

“And then some. They’re not so bad. At the very least they’re good for a laugh.”

“Don’t say that last part anywhere near my aunt,” Patricia warns. “Don’t even think it.”

“Shit, I forgot she’s psychic.” The corner of his mouth lifts, eyes teasing. “That’s kinda scary. She’s gonna be pretty fucking appalled at the constant dirty thoughts I have about you.”

“I’d tell her to block them out but she specifically said your aura was too strong to stifle.”

“Fuck.”

“Time to get your mind out of the gutter, dude.”

Billy pouts. “But I *live* there.” Then his eyes sharpen on the dim cabin window facing them. “Is he..?” He squints for a moment before snorting. “Yup, he’s watching us.”

Patricia sees a flash of a white beard as it disappears behind a paisley curtain. “I’m getting major Gandalf vibes from him.”

Billy raises his brows. “You’re into Lord of The Rings?”

“Read The Hobbit in high school. Saw the cartoon. Gandalf is mainly

what I remember..”

“Mention that and he’s gonna *love* you. He’s a huge Tolkien nerd.” Billy grins. “By the way, he’s gonna try to get us both stoned as hell. Don’t feel pressured about it, though. I’ll fight him off for ya.”

Patricia considers as they walk towards the robin’s egg-blue front door. “Well, we *are* in Malibu. I wouldn’t mind a tokes off the ol’ joint with a sunset like that. Though, I’ve only tried it once or twice in college. Made me feel fuzzy and giggle a lot. I’ve felt way more fucked up with booze.”

“I dunno, his stuff is way stronger than anything else I’ve tried.” Billy leans against the side of the doorframe. “I mean, I’d totally love to get stoned with you, but this isn’t some normal mid-grade shit. It’ll knock you on your fucking ass. I’d definitely take it easy.”

A bearded man in khaki’s and a paisley green shirt opens the door just then. Seashells around his neck. Gold earrings in both ears. Balding but with long graying hair in a pony tail, a mirthful twinkle in his ocean blue eyes.

“Well, look at this,” the man guffaws. “He brought a girl! Finally!” He claps a flustered Billy on the back before scanning Patricia with friendly appraisal. “You’d think a handsome fella like him would pull em’ in left and right. But I knew it wouldn’t be long. Good to see ya, boy.” He loops an arm around Billy’s shoulders briefly for a hug.

Billy and Patricia’s eyes meet for an awkward glance. Pulling girlfriends in isn’t the problem. Keeping them, however, is a different story.

“You a surfer girl, missy?” his uncle continues.

She gives a soft shrug. “In the making, maybe.”

“Call me Ollie.” He extends a leathery hand to shake. “Well I’ll be darned, you look just like that er- what’s her name? Doris Day or maybe Farrah Fawcett or...” His scraggly brows furrow as he mutters, chin in his hand. “...who’s that woman...I think I saw her on Dynasty...spitting image.”

Billy clears his throat to interrupt the stoner rambling. "Patricia. Her name's Patricia."

"Patricia," Ollie muses. "Well, she'll do just fine. Here, let me grab that for you." He takes her duffel from her. Glances over at Billy to tut before he turns back to the house. "You make your girl carry the load? What kinda boyfriend are you?" Billy makes a face of exasperation, his hands currently full with heavy bags of groceries.

They enter the rustic cabin, Billy disappearing upstairs with all their luggage as Ollie gives her a tour of the main floor. His furniture is in a seventies time warp, adorned with shag carpeting and velour couches.

Ollie guides her to the avocado green kitchen. "Do you like pineapple juice?" He calls from the fridge. "Got about a gallon here I'm looking to get rid of it. Made it myself."

"I'd love some."

"Here." He passes a literal pineapple to her, hollowed out, bright yellow juice sloshing inside. A straw and a tiny pink umbrella sprouting from the top.

"Wow." Patricia takes the drink, trying not to laugh. "Thank you."

Ollie reaches into his khaki pocket, pulls out a perfectly rolled joint. Looks around like Big Brother's watching. "Do you..." His voice lowers his voice to a whisper, palm cupped around his mouth. "... smoke the reefer?"

"Very rarely." She takes a sip, tart sweet juice enveloping her tastebuds. "But why not? Came here to relax after all." She sucks at her straw again. "This is delicious, by the way."

"Thanks." Ollie reveals a smile half-capped with gold. "And don't fear the reefer I always say. Hell, I smoke the stuff everyday and I've never felt better as a sixty five year old." He stops for a beat. "Can't say it's helped my memory much though. What's your name again?"

"Patricia." She watches as Uncle Ollie lights the end of the joint, puffing to get the end glowing red. "How strong is this stuff?"

“Not that strong.” He passes the joint to her, a cloud of smoke misting around him. “Then again... I have developed a tolerance over the years.”

She rests the pineapple on the kitchen counter and takes a drag, coughing immediately from the harsh smoke. “*Tastes strong.*”

“Thanks. Grew it myself.”

Just as her eyes are starting to blur, Billy comes down the stairs and crosses the room towards her. He rests his elbows on the kitchen island separating them, lazily cool as he looks across the countertop.

“Well, well. Look who’s already being indoctrinated into the Cult of Ollie’s Homegrown.” His gaze zeroes in on the second toke Patricia’s inhaling. “Careful with that, Trish. Don’t want you greening out on me.”

Ollie waves away Billy’s concern. “With this batch even *too much* is a good time. This here is the best weed in Malibu. Best I’ve ever grown, at least.” He inhales and passes the joint to Billy with a nod. “Now smarten up and get baked, dude.”

Billy’s lips twitch into a half-grin. “Don’t mind if I do.”

*

Feeling gung-ho about being on vacation, Patricia caves to Ollie’s encouragement and takes five hits total. Billy stops at one.

Twenty minutes later, her limbs are melting into the living room couch as she listens to Ollie’s rambling stories. She leans into Billy’s firm shoulder, giggling, fascinated by the crisp fabric of Billy’s jean jacket as he keeps a warm arm around her.

“So then the cop pulls me over and I eat the whole damn joint!” Ollie slaps his leg, wheezing.

Patricia bursts into laughter while Billy looks only mildly amused, as though he’s heard this tale about a million times. His attention seems much more focused on the back of his knuckles delicately stroking the soft skin of her arm.

As Billy's circling touch continues down her flesh, she loses focus on Uncle Ollie's epic saga. She scans over him, admiring his profile, his long lashes. The most thorough examination she's had of him in... ever. He's lit up in vivid, technicolor clarity, high definition detail. Freakishly beautiful.

Her heart starts beating fast like she just met him for the first time, maybe even *harder* than it did then. Their eyes meet when he catches her staring, sparks stoked into mutual flames. His gaze travels to rest at her mouth. Fireworks explode into glitter, from tailbone to crown.

A minute later, Ollie leaves the room to fetch his guitar.

Billy lowers his mouth to her ear, words a deep, dark honey. "You ready for bed?"

Apparently she needs to get her mind out of the gutter too because she's instantly wet.

His fault. That voice just undressed her.

She nods and he kisses her right there, quick and hot before he takes her by the hand to pull her off the couch.

"Hey, we're gonna call it a night," he says to Ollie now returning with his bright red Fender.

"Aw shucks, really?" Ollie strums a few chords. "I was going to serenade ya but I suppose it's getting late."

"Yeah, it's a been a long day," Billy says smoothly. "We gotta unpack our shit too. See you in the morning." He pats his uncle on the shoulder as they exit, leaving Ollie to his solo strumming. Patricia barely gets a chance to say goodnight before she's whisked away up the rickety wooden stairs.

It's odd how this feels like both a dream yet the most clarity she's ever experienced. As Billy guides her into their spare room, she hyper-focuses on the powerful form of his body. The underlying muscle. His dominating energy. How he moves, breathes... exists. The warmth of him. Not just in body, but in spirit too. It seeps into her, all over.

Fuck, she's stoned.

"Wanna take a shower?" Billy strips off his jean jacket, seemingly confident in his high compared to her psychedelic overwhelm. He pauses to look deeper at her. "How you holdin' up?"

"I'm like...really, really high." She dissolves into a nervous giggle. "I've never felt like this."

"I bet. You smoked that joint like a champ." Billy places a steadying hand on her shoulder, thumb stroking in a soothing motion. "Is it a good high at least?"

She pauses to assess, scanning over the wooden floor, the bright red bedspread, the cozy rocking chair in the corner. All looking a little too alive, but also...fascinating. "I think so."

"Cool," Diamond eyes give her a careful once-over as if to make sure. "Hey, come here." He pulls her into his arms for a comforting hug.

They melt into one body. At least on her end they do.

"You're so warm." Patricia inhales sultry cologne, instinctively gripping onto the muscle of his back and shoulders. "...and strong." She laughs under her breath at her own fawning, closes her eyes and sees stars bursting, neon colors streaking and colliding. "I love how you feel."

His hand slides down her spine in a silken caress. "I love how you feel too."

Billy undresses her in the small ensuite bathroom. The tension froths to overwhelming levels of awareness as her gaze consumes him. His arms ripple with strength. His eyes contain ocean galaxies. Every time they fix on her, lightning strikes in her stomach, re-discovering his beauty all over again.

Sensation. Electric heat. His skin on hers. He cups her breast to taste the dusky-pink peak, and pleasure shoots straight between her legs.

"I'm so much more sensitive," she breathes, on fire as he caresses circles into her hips with his thumbs,

“Me too.” He kisses her with slow glides of his tongue. “Fuck, this is gonna be a good week.”

The shower water is warm. A sensual rain that loosens limbs. They cling to each other under the stream, stoned and content. His arousal juts against her back as his hot kisses press into her shoulder. Tilting her head, he licks a stripe up her throat, leaving her flushed and squirming. Just when she thinks he’s going to take her right there, he reaches for the shampoo instead and soaps up her scalp.

After being thoroughly cleansed, Patricia sorts through her beauty bag. As she runs scented oil through the tips of her hair, Billy notices a particular sacred item: her pink vibrator, nestled in amongst her lotions and makeup.

“What’s this?” he purrs, obviously knowing exactly what it is.

A flush spreads over her chest and face. “Something I use now and then...when you’re not there.”

“Ugh, that’s hot as fuck.” Billy reaches for the gadget but she zips up the bag in embarrassment.

“I try not to use it too much,” she croaks. “Makes me kinda desensitized if I make a habit of it. You feel way better anyways...”

He smirks at her lame explanation. “I’m not jealous of inanimate objects, Trish. Or vibrating ones.” He wraps his arms around her waist from behind, kissing her shoulder as his fingers travel towards the aching-wet junction between her legs. “And I like you nice and sensitive. But I’d also like for you to lose control. Can we...?”

She never thought of introducing vibrators into their sex life. The idea of him teasing her clit with one makes her pussy throb. “I wouldn’t mind.” She retrieves her toy from the bag.

Soon they’re on the bed, their wet bodies dampening the lemon-scented fabric. She laughs for no reason, triggering his answering chuckle, their shared high making this more surreal even as desire thrums between the two of them.

He spreads her legs with a firm grip, licks her from entrance to clit,

suckling her nub with a lewd slurp that would make her giggle even more if she wasn't busy gasping. The pressure of his tongue is so heightened by the weed that she climaxes in less than a minute.

He comes up for air with a grin, licking her slick from his lips. "Damn, we should get you stoned more often." More silken kisses ensue, more caresses. Soothing loveplay, sensual and sweet.

That is, until he flips her on her stomach. He pulls her hips up so her ass is in the air, her ear and cheek pressed into the mattress. The whirl of the vibrator fills the room, promising overstimulation.

"Billy-" Patricia gasps as the tip of the vibrator touches her clit, jolting her with fresh pleasure. "Oh *fuck*..."

The head of his hard cock caresses her opening. "Tell me what you want, sweetheart."

That velvet voice again. Warm as whiskey. Makes her legs twitch, more heat rocketing up her lower back. "Fuck me...fuck me, please."

"*How* do you want me to fuck you?" He edges in one inch. Stays so still. Moves the vibrator up a fraction so it's barely touching her clit now. A blatant tease.

"Hard." She lifts her hips and undulates slowly, intentionally. Relishing his intake of breath. "Fuck me hard. Rough. I need it."

He slides into her with one firm move of his hips, pausing at the hilt. That's her only moment of reprieve because a second later he's pummeling her with harsh, tight thrusts.

She tries not to squeal as a loud slap lands on her ass. Another follows, stinging where her thigh meets her bottom cheek. Pleasurable pain makes her inner muscles twitch around him.

"Billy, I- oh my god, " Her voice sounds strangled as the bed frame cracks against the wall, the old mattress squeaking as the words jerk out of her in short bursts. "Shouldn't. We. Be quieter? Your Unc-"

"He's half deaf," Billy grunts. "Plus, I'm a grown man. If someone has a problem with me fucking my girlfriend on vacation, that's on

them.” The vibrator goes directly on her clit. “You gonna come for me again?” he coos. “Bet you’ll squeeze me so fucking hard with this thing.”

“It’s so damn intense,” she moans.

“Does that mean you want more of me?” He shifts their bodies then, lays on his side and pulls her into a spooning position, one arm holding her tight against his chest as he grinds into her from behind. Slower but far deeper, the vibrator doing most of the work.

The stimulation: it’s overwhelming. Just as her orgasm approaches, there’s a knock at the door. Billy pauses, the toy still humming against her clit, a slight moan escaping through her lips pressed together.

Billy clamps a hand over her mouth. “Yeah?”

To her mortification he starts to slowly move in her again. She tries with all her willpower not to come.

His uncle’s voice comes through the door. “I’m going head to the corner store before it closes. You guys need anything?”

“Uh...” Billy’s hand tightens around her mouth because she’s making tiny little mewling noises. Impossible to hold back as his hips continue their steady grind. “Pancake mix?”

“You got it, kid. See ya tomorrow.”

“Night,” As his uncle’s footsteps descend down the stairs, Billy changes pace, fucks her hard until the headboard rattles again. He keeps his fingers tight over her lips, two slipping inside. Her tongue sliding over salty skin in response. “That was close. You’re fucking lucky I didn’t just make you come right then.”

All she can do is grunt and moan around his fingers.

“That’d be real dirty, wouldn’t it?” he murmurs against her earlobe, husky and low. “You coming on my cock when he’s right outside the door. Fucking nasty, baby.”

Patricia can't hold back, falling apart with a heady moan. Jerking, trembling, gushing around his cock. He coats her insides with hot jets of come a second later, their limbs entwined. He stays still there for a full minute afterwards, slowly softening as their kisses melt together.

She passes out in his arms, thoroughly obliterated.

*

Patricia wakes from weed-infused dreams of dancing pineapples and Uncle Ollie as the real Gandalf, to Billy rubbing her arm, an excited rasp in his voice.

"Baby, you *gotta* see this."

She stirs with a groan, wincing as bright moonlight stings her eyes. "What is it?" Her words come out slightly cranky as Billy motions her to follow him.

Still feeling pretty stoned, she slips into a bathrobe and groggily trails him down the stairs, the house dark except for porch-light streaming inside. Her bare feet step onto the back patio as sea salt hits her nostrils.

Then her jaw drops.

In the distance, the ocean literally glows neon. An otherworldly royal blue crashing against the sand, lit even further by the full moon piercing the black sky.

"It's beautiful!" She grips Billy's shoulder in excitement. "What the hell."

"It's called bioluminescence. I've only seen it a couple of times." He turns on his heel and rushes back inside.

"Where are you going?"

Billy soon returns with their surfboards under his arm, stripped to his swim trunks. "I need to check this out." He pushes her purple board towards her. "By the way, if you wanna surf at night...this is kinda the time to do it." He shoots her a grin before taking off towards the

phosphorescent shore.

Patricia gets a flutter of nervousness, but it's soon followed by an adrenaline rush. She'd be crazy to pass up this opportunity. Why miss the ride of her life, when she has the most experienced surfer she's ever met by her side, the whole ocean lit up for her under a star-dusted horizon?

No room for regrets.

She bolts inside and up the stairs to squeeze into her black one piece bathing suit before catching up to Billy, her feet pushing through gritty sand towards him.

He's at the shoreline, waiting, assessing the surf. "You wanna watch me first or go in together?"

"Together," she nods.

They paddle out, something magical and alien about the way the neon ocean churns and swirls around them. Eerie yet beautiful. The thought crosses her mind that maybe Billy didn't actually wake her. That this is just a very vivid dream.

If that's true, she doesn't want to wake up.

Billy comes up on his board first, fast and cat-like as he glides along the peak of a wave. She catches the next one, skimming through the dreamy blue below. For once, it's not a struggle to stay upright. Her body seems to settle into the wave of its own accord.

Not afraid to fall. A first for her.

Patricia doesn't topple. Another first. She rides the peak and returns to Billy near the shallower waves at shore, laughing at how...easy that was.

High on that victory, she passes by him, wading to the sandy beach and stripping to bare skin.

Billy looks over his shoulder at her, sitting on his board with casual grace, the water lapping around his knees. "Watcha doin' there,

baby?" The bright sea lights up his features, making him look like a fantasy creature, a mer-lover emerging from the ocean depths.

"I just feel so...free!" She leaves her board there, tossing suit to the sand, diving back into the water to merge naked with glistening waves. Billy copies her idea with matching enthusiasm, suit and board left at shore before he swims after her.

She frontcrawls out until instinct tells her to stop, the waves almost smothering her, toes barely able to skim the sand. As she treads water, bright blues sparkle. The moon glows. Everything is perfection.

Billy joins her in that ocean paradise. There's something in his eyes, made all the more vivid by the surreal light show, some raw emotion for her that she saw so clearly on her birthday. Vulnerable.

"You're beautiful, Trish," he says softly.

Her mind instinctively turns a dark corner, returning to the hellish kingdom where Barry ruled. Memories of being a voluptuous doll: glossy cleavage on billboards, legs spread, crimson lips puckered for a salivating audience. "Being naked helps."

"No," He shakes his head, brows pinched. "No, it's not like that. It's just-you're happy. The way you're all lit up inside out, glowing." He leans to kiss her lips, his body melting into hers, protecting her from crashing waves, from bad memories. "Couldn't dream up that kind of beauty if I tried."

After a few breaths, dark memory subsides as the sea lulls her. She smiles at Billy before floating on her back, kicking towards the shore as the moon entrances her from above.

That's when her body starts to feel one with the water. No separation, her nakedness no longer feeling like it belongs to somebody else. For once, her body feels completely and utterly liberated, not an object of worship nor repulsion. Inseparable from the land, the sky, or the stars. All blending into one being.

True freedom.

In the shallow tide, she looks back at Billy and laughs, limbs star-fishing out, “I *am* beautiful.” A birthright given to her and all the stars in the sky, every cell and atom. “You are too. Just like the moon and the sea...everything.”

“Thanks, Trish,” he chuckles, following her as she returns to the sand. “Kinda cheesy but I’ll take it.”

She stands at the shoreline, still in awe of the ocean’s neon hues. Humbled by the majesty of nature. “Fuck, it’s like I never really *felt* that until now, all that hippie stuff. Right now I feel...one with everything.” Her arms spread, fingers wiggling.

Billy sidles up to her, his arm draping around her shoulders for an affectionate squeeze. “I’d say it’s the pot talking but I think it’s just this place.” He glances towards the illuminated surf. “And all this cool glowy shit. You’d have to be dead inside to not feel something.”

“I haven’t felt this alive in a long, long time,” she murmurs.

“I think that feeling’s the main reason I love surfing so fucking much. You become a part of something larger than yourself, the shitty day to day grind. When things get rough, you can just go to the water and cleanse it all away. Saved my life.”

The earnestness in his eyes moves her to the core, makes her feel close to exploding with the urge to cover him with kisses.

It’s then that she almost says it. Almost returns his confession of love, the word bubbling up her throat, nearly bursting past pressed lips.

The moment breaks like the crest of a wave. Fear clams her up, turns her wooden and unsure. “I’m getting sleepy. Maybe we should head back.”

“I’m ready to crash too,” He yawns, then kisses her temple, unaware of the battle raging between her heart and mind. “Though a part of me thinks I’m already dreaming.”

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks for reading! as usual, feedback is cherished so feel free to leave a comment below or send a message to my ask box.

and yeah, things are about to get angst on steroids again so brace yourselves...

27. touch of grey

Patricia gleams bright as sunshine. She and Amy just had a fantastic session of girl talk over the phone, with Amy offering her a job opening at her father's law firm. It's simple secretarial work, but it pays well, and having that cushion after the carpet pulled from under her is a huge relief. She takes the offer without batting a lash.

Billy gets a call of his own, leisurely pacing the living room now as he chats and nods. A rotary phone in one hand, cord trailing behind as he looks out the window towards turquoise ocean. Patricia lazes in a coral-pink bikini on the couch nearby, peeking at him over a surfing magazine. He sits beside her, shifting her bare calves over his thick thighs. Stroking her skin as he listens. When her eyes meet his, he shoots her a half-moon grin.

Fuck, that ache in her heart. It's getting worse and worse.

"That was Dave." Billy hangs up and turns to face her. "What do you think of stopping off in San Francisco before heading to your aunt's place?" He sets the phone on the floor and captures her foot in one hand, massaging her instep with a knowing thumb.

Patricia's brow raises. "That's six hours away."

"Five, if I'm driving."

"It's past Santa Barbara, though."

"I know." Billy reaches to tuck her hair behind her ear before cupping the back of her neck. "Thing is, Dave's already out there with his main squeeze and he took the liberty of booking a show for us."

Patricia blinks in pleasant surprise. "What? Really?"

"He says if I don't show up there's somebody else at the ready." Billy offers her a sardonic tilt of his head. "I'd hate to have some rando taking my place."

So would she. "Let's go then." Patricia sets the magazine down on the

coffee table, already giddy at the prospect of a San Fran detour. "Can't turn down an offer like that."

"Sweet." Billy stretches sun-kissed limbs with a groan, angling his body on top of hers until she's squished into the sofa. His head turns to lay on her chest. "Well, that's fucking exciting then."

"We're really living the highlife this week."

"Mmhm." He presses a lazy kiss between her breasts. "California dreamin', baby."

Patricia twines around him, pushes sun-bleached waves from his forehead to admire thick lashes, the slope of his freckled nose.

Then dread bubbles. "What does Nick think?"

"He's not coming," Billy shrugs. "He's sort of...taking a break from the band, I guess. Not sure what the hell is going on there. He only talked to Dave about it. Rosco and I are on the outside looking in, as usual." A loaded pause. "Can't say I'm mad."

Relief hugs her close. She's not sure she could handle seeing Nick on her relaxing vacation. "You guys will still kill it."

Billy hums in approval against her cleavage. "That's what I just told Dave, but he's worried. I dunno why. He sings better than Nick anyways." He grips the back of her bare thighs, kissing his way up her chest and throat, until his mouth finds the sensitive spot behind her ear. "You've been to San Francisco, right?"

"Not since I was a little girl." She stirs at the sensation of stubble on skin, the subtle nip of teeth. "I've got some faded memories."

His mouth slows. "Any good ones?"

Colourful buildings, rose-tinted glasses and the smell of musky patchouli saturate her senses. She smiles. "Surprisingly...yes."

A day of surfing under fiery sun proceeds, skin browning, smoking Uncle Ollie's homegrown until eyes fuzz over. Then they pack their things to head out to San Francisco that very night. Before crushing

Patricia in a goodbye hug, Ollie makes sure she brings his entire Lord of The Rings trilogy with her.

“They’re all yours if you want,” he says as she stacks the books under an arm. “Though I’ve gotta feeling you’ll be back here again to return them.” He shoves a fistful of joints in her palm with a wink. “Have fun, missy. Stay wild.”

*

Patricia’s childhood is reborn.

She breezes down Haight-Ashbury street in the afternoon rush, Billy’s hand in hers. Colors pop. People bustle in and out of boutiques while crimson trolleys ring past. Though nowhere near as psychedelic as the Summer of Love, it’s still a familiar oasis.

She shops for sundresses. Billy helps, assessing each one as she emerges from dressing rooms to twirl for him. He praises them all, at one point emitting a long wolf whistle, the staff snapping their heads towards the lewd sound. Patricia smacks his shoulder, shushing him while he beams like the devil incarnate.

With a wicker basket full of dresses hanging from her arm, they wander the eclectic neighbourhoods to arrive at Dave’s cheap blue rental. Supertramp emanates out the windows as dusk encroaches. The smell of BBQ in the air makes her salivate. As they stand outside the front gate to check out the overgrown garden, Billy spots a bright splash of wildflowers pushing through the picket fence.

He plucks a stem of purple aster, perching it in her up-do before bellowing, “*If you’re going to San Francisco...*”

“No, please don’t.” Patricia snorts as Billy’s gruff voice sends that sixties anthem down the block, pedestrians turning to stare. She attempts to smush her palm over his loud mouth but he darts away. Across the small yard, the front door of the beaten-up townhouse opens. Dave emerges to greet them with a gorgeous smile.

“*Be sure to wear flowers in your hair,*” Billy finishes quieter with a wink. He waves at his best friend, opening the gate to approach.

“Wait.” Patricia draws the blossom from behind her ear, planting it in his golden locks before he can move past her. “There. Much better.”

“Hey, you made it!” Dave jogs down the walkway in jean shorts and a neon orange crop top, embracing Billy in a tight hug. He pulls away to admire the new floral arrangement. “You look stunning, my dude.”

Billy’s mouth perks. “Is there a day that I don’t?”

Then Dave meets Patricia’s eyes and awkward quiet ensues. With one shared look it becomes very clear that their last interaction was her hissing a bitter *fuck you* at him. Her insides twist.

“Truce?” Dave stretches a brown arm out for a handshake. “You better say yes, or it’s gonna be an awkward-as-hell dinner.”

“Yes!” She sets down her basket and bursts forward, squeezing Dave in a close hug. “I’m really sorry-”

“I’m sorry too.” He pats her back, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. “That was a weird fucking night, wasn’t it?”

She laughs morbidly at that understatement, heart instantly heavy at the grim memory. “It really was.” Her voice breaks. “It’s all over now, though. I quit.”

“Yeah, Billy told me the good news.” Dave takes her hands in his and steps back, seeking her gaze with a firm but caring tone. “Next job is gonna be way better, alright? Billy and I won’t let you work for another scumbag corporation again. That’s a guarantee.” Billy nods to cement that.

Patricia’s shoulders tighten at how hyper-aware everyone is of her situation, but the offered comfort lightens her spirit nonetheless. “Thanks, Dave.” She beams a soft smile and taps his arm. “Where’s your man?”

“Inside.” Dave cocks his chin towards the house. “Hope y’all like tequila and darts.” He rotates on his bare heel and ambles through the entrance, hollering *Adam, we have company!*

“Dangerous combo but okay,” Patricia chuckles, placing her hand on

a cocked hip before peeking at Billy. “Just to warn you, darts are my specialty.” She picks her basket of sundresses up off the lawn.

“Not surprised.” Billy gently grips her shoulders from behind, thumbs massaging into tight muscles as he walks her towards the front door. With unexpected heat, he buries his mouth in her neck to murmur at her ear, “After seeing you massacre those cute little ducks at the games stand, I’m thoroughly prepared to be destroyed.”

“I’ll take it easy on you,” she quips, skin warming rapidly.

“Don’t. I want some incentive to ruin you tonight.” His innuendo seeps between her legs with such precision, she nearly trips on the welcome mat. “Not that I need any.”

After a delicious BBQ dinner, Adam is the one that destroys them all in a game of darts, handsome behind his moustache and leather. With a shot of tequila each in their bellies, Dave drives everyone out to a small bar jam-packed full of metalheads. It’s different than the L.A scene. No teased hair in sight, no painted glamour. Just raw noise, screeching notes and a need for speed.

The hugest difference is that Dave sings tonight. And that’s where it finally clicks together for her; they never needed Nick to begin with. With a mix of harsher guitar lines and Dave’s angelic crooning, the audience is enthralled, fists pumping in rapture. With Nick they were great. With Dave, they’re jaw-dropping.

Another addition that warms her heart; Billy plays the drum riffs that he showed her in private months ago. In fact, entire songs are transformed to feature *his* skills, *his* influence. Knowing how he struggled to direct the band in any way, she swells with pride.

They return to Dave’s rental at midnight. After a few extra shots of liquor and a session of the hottest secret sex on the pull-out couch, their half-drunk limbs encircle each other. Muscles liquified. All drowsy smiles.

“What side of the family is your uncle on?” Patricia cherishes Billy’s sleepy face with a gentle touch, thumbs tracing his jawline. “Never asked.”

“My mom’s.” He captures her palm to kiss the tips of her fingers, words slightly slurred. “He’s like twelve years older than her so he almost feels like a grandpa sometimes.”

“I feel like he’d get along with my aunt.” Something she’s been contemplating since she laid eyes on Ollie. “She’s a widow, you know.”

A smirk curls in the near-dark. “Are you going to try to play matchmaker with them?” His soft bite nips the inside of her wrist. “Feels a little incestuous but I guess technically there’s no harm. I’ll have to meet her in person first before I give my blessing, though.”

She pokes his belly. “I think it’s a great plan, but...that could just be the booze’s influence. Brings up crazy ideas.” A not-so-distant memory returns, her tongue relaxed enough to spill. “Speaking of which, the last time you were drunk you said something absolutely insane to me. Wanna hear it?”

“I did?” Hazy eyes glue to hers. He’s nowhere near as drunk as he was that night. Just tipsy enough to be pliable, loose. “Uh...sure.”

Patricia’s not sure why she’s choosing now to relay this information. Maybe she needs to see his reaction, watch him laugh over the absurdity. “You said you wanted me to have your baby.”

“What?” All the muscles in his body go rigid, a groan echoing. “*Noo...*”

Patricia grins, hand shifting to stroke his hair. “*Babies*, if I remember right.”

He’s not laughing. “Fucking hell.” He crosses an arm across his forehead with a grimace. “And you’re still here?”

“Yup. Still here.”

“Huh.” His expression relaxes, as if he needed her reassurance. “Must have done something right since then.” His kiss brands her bare arm as he folds her into his chest.

Patricia puffs out a breath, realizing he’s not taking those words back.

“You were wasted enough to say that to any girl who took care of you. I know it doesn’t mean anything.”

Billy goes silent, adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. “I mean, to be fair, I think you’re the only girl in the world I’d ever say that to. Not that I’m looking to knock you up any time soon.”

Her fingers hover over his skin. An electric buzz forms in her limbs that has nothing to do with alcohol.

“Shit. Am I freaking you out again?” He sighs, eyes shut, somewhere between sleep and loose-tongued honesty. “Too late now, I guess. Already told you how I feel. Don’t even care if you never say it back. I’m fucked over you, Trish. We both know that.”

“Billy...”

“No, scratch that.” A notch between his brows forms, words tumbling out ragged. “I *do* care that you don’t say it back. Fuckin’ hurts.” The sudden pain in his voice breaks her heart in half. “But if it means I get to be with you, I’ll wait for-fucking-ever.”

No response leaves her throat, but his hold on her stays strong, unyielding. He succumbs to sleep moments later. Night transforms into cool light of dawn and Patricia is still awake, anxiety piercing her bones like a thousand tiny drills.

Morning birds chirp. Patricia sneaks out of that iron cuddle, escaping to the nearby streets of Haight Ashbury alone, needing space to mull the words uttered by a woozy Billy last night. That rocky, unsure feeling returning. The fear of closeness. Intimacy. Of opening up.

She should never have mentioned the baby thing. He *did* freak her out.

Too soon. Too fast. Too typically Billy.

Yet there’s a softness in her for it. Can’t help but be flattered.

Patricia’s mind shoots towards a future where they’re still together and solid, maintaining the energy they’ve cultivated since leaving L.A. Happy. A ring glinting on her finger. His palm resting on her

growing belly-

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. She buries those unwanted thoughts in the deepest dirt. Makes a dark graveyard of them.

The sparkle in her sternum lingers.

She finds Luna Records under cotton candy skies. Vinyl in neat rows. Dream catchers and psychedelic posters in the windows. She whisks to the metal section, thoughts swirling as she flips through Metallica, Ratt, Motley Crue. A great selection. Rarities she wasn't able to find back home. As she scans, a feminine drawl pierces her focus.

"Hey, you're Patricia Des Barres, right?"

She glances to the front counter to find a woman around her age with short magenta hair. A stocky, shapely figure in a leopard skin blouse.

Patricia winces, preparing to get interrogated about her MTV disaster. "Yeah..."

"I lovvvee your zine." The girl leans back to accentuate with the words, eyes nearly rolling with the motion. "Seriously the best thing to ever happen to the metal world. At least in California."

Patricia reddens. "Thank you." She sets the album back on the shelf. Crosses her arms. "How do you know about that? I only ever published it in L.A."

"A friend of mine from there used to bring me a stack of them every time he visited. It's been big inspiration for my own work."

"Cool." Patricia draws nearer, flattery blooming in her blood like bright poppies. "You write a zine too?"

"Magazine," the girl corrects. "Maybe you've heard of it. Little Queen? It's mostly about female artists in San Francisco. Just started releasing it this year."

Patricia's eyes widen as she leans against the counter. "I've read that! Total breath of fresh air."

“Really?” Now it’s the girl’s turn to pinken, matching the bubblegum blush on her head.

“Really.” An honest smile. “Pretty rare to have a women-centric magazine in the rock n’ roll world. So very needed.”

The girl beams back. “I’m Clemmy, by the way.” A small hand extends forward, bedazzled with rhinestones.

Patricia takes cool, soft fingers in hers for a shake. “Nice to meet you.”

“So, I’m not gonna lie.” Clemmy pulls a copy of Little Queen from a drawer. Pale pink and glossy. “I stole *a lot* off you. The way you ask questions. The laid back vibe. The formatting and design...” She skims through shiny pages before pushing the magazine towards Patricia. “I gotta give you credit for that.”

Both of them feeling the mutual glow, Clemmy exchanges numbers with her. As she scrawls her digits on a scrap of paper, she looks curiously at Patricia. “So do you live here now?”

Something glitters in her gut. “No.”

“Darn.” Clemmy clicks her tongue. “I was going to ask if you wanted to write something for it. There’s a few shows coming up that really need a reviewer.”

“Yeah, sorry.” A heavy, sinking sensation. “I’m out of here tomorrow. Santa Barbara before going back to L.A. New job lined up and everything.”

“That’s a shame,” Clemmy hands over her number. “Y’know, it doesn’t pay half bad either. This is my uncle’s store so I watch it a few days per week, but to be real, the *magazine* is what’s paying my bills.”

“You’re kidding.” Patricia stows the scrap paper in her back pocket. “I was working full time on Live Wire and barely made a dime. Had to work another full time job to get by. I mean...” She bites her lip. “before the t.v show.”

Thank god Clemmy doesn’t press her about Barry’s trainwreck.

“That makes me want to cry. You honestly should be paid out the wazoo for what you did.”

“You are way too nice to me.” She lightly cuffs Clemmy’s shoulder, a natural kinship already forming. “We’ll keep in touch.”

“I’d love that. Call me anytime.”

Despite buying nothing, Patricia leaves the record store floating, a free copy of San Francisco’s trailblazing magazine in her purse and a smile etched on.

*

It’s hard to leave San Francisco behind. Auntie Doris’s haven on the horizon doesn’t abate the bittersweet goodbye. There’s something open and welcoming about that city. A freedom to be yourself. To relax. In Hollywood there’s a pressure to “make it” that only builds with time. A pressure that shaped and molded her like a diamond, yes. Gave her grit. Yet she can’t help but wonder who she would have become without the strain.

“Damn, this place is cute.” Billy says as he pulls into her aunt’s long gravel driveway. Sea-foam surges in the distance. A reflection of their view in Malibu, albeit more whimsical. Impossibly green trees drape their limbs from above, the front door circled by delicate vines. “Are we in a fucking fairytale?”

Auntie Doris opens the door for them in neon blue aerobic attire, face illuminated, high blonde pony tail bobbing. Her eyes bulge with one look at Billy’s carnal beauty before flashing to Patricia. “Hello, you two. I was just finishing my Jane Fonda workout.” She pulls her niece to her for a damp hug. “So good to see you, sweetie. Missed you.”

Despite the pleasant tone, there’s a touch of concern underneath that makes Patricia ill at ease. “Good to see you too, Auntie.”

“Well,” Doris scans over the muscled, leather-clad blonde as she lets them inside. “I wish I could say I’ve heard so much about you, Billy-” She gives Patricia a pointed raise of her brows. “-but you’re truly a mystery man to me.”

Patricia shoots a look that says *please stop*, shocked Doris would put her on the spot within a minute of arriving.

“I don’t mind being a man of mystery.” He brushes her aunt’s comment off but Patricia’s sure it stings. “She’s definitely said a lot of great things about you, though.” His eyes dart around the charming foyer. “Wow, your place is awesome.”

“Thank you,” Doris beams.

“You obviously put a lot of work into it.” Billy unloads the charm as his gaze touches over various blown glass sculptures, the craftsmanship of winding wooden stairs, homemade windchimes dangling in stained glass windows. “Lots of personality here, Doris. Really cool.”

“Me and my late hubby worked on this house for years.” Her aunt smooths fingers over the carved wooden banister, a far-off smile on her lips. “It’s nice to have people around to appreciate it. Doesn’t happen often these days.”

That’s when it hits Patricia how lonely Auntie Doris must be lately. No one around to talk to. All her friends either dead or miles away. The niece she cares for like a daughter never calling, never home to answer. Forgotten.

An avalanche of guilt engulfs her. She could have bothered to phone her aunt now and then. She never talked to her about the tv show, her boyfriend, her life in any way at all. Left her completely in the dark.

Shit. She keeps closing herself off from the world, even while she’s on top of it. Sometimes she forgets people take that lack of communication personally. Get their feelings hurt. Seeing Auntie so clearly touchy with her now makes her realize just *how* hurt.

Doris is like a mother to her. You call your mother. You don’t hide your life from them.

While she’s been fretting, Billy’s been schmoozing. Already Auntie Doris is giggling, touching Billy’s shoulder in solidarity as she shows

him her extensive macrame collection.

Good. At least one of them can lighten the mood.

Thanksgiving dinner is served at the oak table. Auntie is on a pescatarian diet, so there's zero turkey to be found. Grilled salmon and baked golden potatoes take its place, a course of seasonal salad greens to follow. So delicious there's no mourning the absence. Despite the flavor, Patricia forces down every bite, wondering how her aunt would react to her recent relapse. If she can just tell from looking at her.

Billy guides the conversation beautifully, saving Patricia from talking when her heart's in her throat. His hand reaches under the table to claim hers, circling a thumb over her knuckles as though he can tell shame has been eating her alive all evening.

Auntie seems to have let it go by now, entertained by Billy's dazzling grin and tales of surfing adventures, drumming gigs, carpentry jobs gone awry. But for some reason Patricia can't move on, convinced she's the worst niece on the planet.

After a dessert of warm apple pie, Auntie Doris coerces Billy into a tarot reading. His body language is skeptical at first. Crossed arms. Lips pressed. But he obliges, following her into the next room.

The door shuts. Patricia sits in the living room, book open to the first chapter of Fellowship Of The Ring. Ears perk to hear her aunt's voice muffled through the door, inaudible. Billy's deep voice carries with *I already know the future's gonna be bumpy, Doris, not sure I need you to tell me that...drama in the band? Yeah, I can see it, not surprised...What do the daggers in the back of that dude mean?...What else do you got? I'm in too deep now to not be curious.*

Then the energy shifts. Patricia can feel it careen in her solar plexus like a riptide. Auntie's tone grows more ominous before it disappears. Billy's voice lowers and lowers until she can't make out any words at all.

They're whispering.

They're whispering about *her*.

The session ends. After Patricia bids Auntie a restrained goodnight, she guides Billy to the spare room. He makes love to her. Ardent, sensual. Deep. Both of them quiet except for their gasping breaths, the subtle squeak of the mattress, their stifled moans. Soft words of sin murmured in her ear. The sea crashing in the distance to match their release.

But under the pleasure, there's something he isn't telling her. Something that has to do with the cards Auntie Doris laid down.

The tension is back.

*

It starts with her mother, pale and frozen blue under dirty bathwater. Her veined hand reaching out to grip her wrist.

"Welcome home, Patty-baby."

One yank and she's submerged. Falls deeper. Down, down into a whirling abyss. Like Alice. Spiralling until she lands on glass shards.

She blinks. Finds herself on the floor of her childhood apartment, her shoulder pressed into the dirty white wall. Familiar crimson insults stain the wallpaper, the ceiling. Sluicing, dripping down onto her forehead, cool red liquid stinging her eyes.

Her head turns to see Barry sitting in the shady corner on a luxurious armchair. Clashing with the filth. Legs crossed as he slowly pulls from a cigar. His face is cloaked in shadow and smoke, only the glint of a sinister smile visible.

Across the room, Derek's naked back is facing her, his figure gaunt in torn black jeans. Half way through writing WHORE across the peeling wallpaper, shoulders shaking with laughter. The ugly sound echoes in the small space. Makes her wince.

He spins with a jerk and his eyes are pale moonstone again, stalking towards her, arms trickling red.

That's when she realizes he wasn't adorning the walls with paint. Her mouth opens to scream but invisible hands grip her neck, choking off all sound.

"Don't need blood." He looks down to where he's dripping to the floor, wounds gashed open. "Just need you." He closes the gap between them, a violent lunge. Presses a red hand into the wall above her, towering. "You'll give me that, won't you, doll?"

She faces away from him. Lashes squeezing shut, forehead wrinkling with the effort. Knowing this is a dream but unable to will herself awake. Eyes flick open again and see a doppelgänger of herself face down on the tattered carpet, her body sheathed in blood-red latex.

Derek crosses the room and wedges his boot into her double's back, like he's about to stick her with a flag and claim her as his territory.

Sightless eyes find hers. "Time to take back what's mine, dollface."

His foot flips her body over. Reveals clouded eyes. A knife protruding from her belly. Blood pooling-

"Trish. Trish, baby, wake up."

Breathe.

Patricia wakes with a wheezing gasp, Billy murmuring comfort in her ear. His hands stroke down her shuddering arms, her tear-stained cheeks.

"You were sobbing," he rasps in the dark, voice strained. "You're here. At your aunt's place. You're safe."

She stifles a wail, whimpering quietly into Billy's chest. Fingernails dig into his shoulders. "It was him again. It was him."

"Come here." Billy grips her tighter as if they aren't already glued together. "You're good. You're good. I've got you."

After the peak of her fear dies, Billy brushes his lips against her forehead. "What did you dream about?"

She sniffles, not sure she wants to reveal. "Derek."

Silence deafens.

"Fuck..." He exhales slow. Waiting for more.

Confessions form behind her lips, push until she finally explodes. "I've been having dreams about him for awhile now. Bad ones."

Billy's palm smooths up her spine, cups the back of her skull, cradling. "He's definitely nightmare fuel." A gentle tone, coaxing. "Hate that he affects you like that."

Patricia nods. "This one had the big three. Him, my mom, and Barry."

He pauses. "Your ex boss?"

"Yeah, Billy, I..." She hesitates. "I didn't tell you about Barry. Or everything about Derek."

His muscles freeze around her. "No?"

She swallows. "Barry tried to...he tried to sleep with me. Touched me."

"Shit." He squeezes her so close, it almost hurts. "Fuck, baby. When? Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was on Halloween. He's the one that gave me the coke. It was just such a big mess, I didn't want to make it worse. You were already so worried about me."

"*Patricia.*" Saying her full name means grave urgency. "You know you can tell me anything. I would have been there for you."

"You're *always* there for me. I don't know how much more there for me you could possibly be. I don't know if it would even have helped."

"It would." That velvet rasp turns to gravel. "It would." He takes a breath. "What else happened?"

She stares at him, his features barely perceptible in the dark. "Derek left more stuff at my old apartment. Vandalized posters of me. Graffitied with *bitch* and *whore* and things like that."

Billy's frustration screams without saying a word.

"Don't be mad," Patricia murmurs.

"I'm not," he clips, dry as bone. "What else?"

He knows her too well. She narrows in on the darkest part of the room. "He smeared his blood on the posters. Well, one of them." She adds the latter like that makes it less terrible.

"Jesus *fuck*. Trish-"

Her throat fills with sand. "Please don't be mad at me. I hate it when you're mad at me."

"I'm fucking mad at *him*." Billy kisses her shoulder in emphasis. "I want him dead. Same with that Barry asshole." He turns to face the ceiling, fuming a haggard breath towards it. "Knew that bald creep would try to fuck you. Knew he couldn't keep his tiny dick in check. Fucking scumbag." He reaches for his pack of cigarettes on the bedside table, not bothering to ask if he can light up inside. A spark flares red. Smoke blossoms.

His anger is so feral, tangible. Even when he's holding back, it makes her feel helpless. "It's over now, Billy. I quit, remember?"

He shakes his head, cherry glow smearing the darkness. "Seems like it's never over."

She watches him stew for an agonizing minute, the rise and fall of his chest, the inhale and exhale of smoke. She wrings her hands. "Do you want to go for a walk? Get some air?" A pause. "Feels like I can't breathe."

Billy looks to the window. The moon still hangs heavy in the sky, brightens the landscape. He sits upright before he speaks, clearly forcing his voice to soften. "Put on a jacket," he grunts, whipping the covers off of them. "It's getting colder out there."

*

An empty Santa Barbara shoreline. Wind howling. Black waves push into sand like lapping ink. They sit down on a log to watch the play of shadow and moonlight across the water.

Billy exhales a long breath, shifting beside her. "Trish, there's something I need to tell you."

She knew it. A weight settles in her chest, suffocating. "Is it about what Auntie Doris told you?"

"Sort of, but honestly I've been thinking about it for awhile." He clasps the back of his neck, rubs his shoulder. Self soothing. "I want to move back to San Francisco."

Her lungs don't seem to work. A hole has opened up in the sand and swallowed her. "Okay..."

Another heavy breath. "It's just, there's nothing for me in Los Angeles. I hate it there. Always did. Like, even what I thought I wanted, the recognition or whatever. Playing with a popular band. It's not really what I wanted at all. Dave's ninety percent sure he's moving back. Cat's Eye, at least the way it was in L.A, is pretty much done now. And I think it's for the best."

Her heart feels like it's being squeezed by a fist. "But...what about us?"

"That's the other thing." He takes her hand but her fingers are stiff and clammy. Won't seem to ply to his. "I want you to come with me."

She makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a strangled cry. "I can't do that."

"Why not?" His thumb streaks across her palm, agitated. "We care about each other. Things have been so smooth between us past few weeks, even barely spending a minute apart. Didn't you feel that?"

She's so stunned she can hardly form words. "Yeah...but--"

"Look. It's not safe for you in L.A, Trish. You know it. I know it. Hell,

even that cop told you to leave town. We need to get real about this.”

“*You* get real.” She jerks her hand away from him. “I’m not going to leave my whole life behind for you, Billy. This isn’t the fucking fifties.”

“Life?” His voice hardens. “What life, Trish? Everywhere you turn in that place it’s just someone trying to degrade you. Exploit you. You’ve got a fucking psychopath after you-” He pauses, forcing himself to slow down. “Fuck, I know I’m sounding shitty. But it would be best for both of us. You could have a fresh start.”

She hates how her gut recognizes truth there. But there’s something stubborn in her that refuses to bend to him, can’t stand how he’s firmly decided this and expects her to comply. It’s infuriating. She just spent so much energy squirming her way out of a man’s control. Now here he is, doing it all over again. “What about my new job I’ve got lined up? What about Amy? Hell, what if I just plain like Los Angeles better and want to stay there? This is so not cool of you to assume I’m ready for this.”

“Honestly, I’ve got a feeling that if you asked Amy, she’d agree. Or if you asked literally anyone.” Billy huffs through his nose. “Trish, I get that it’s soon. I get that you’re still working on trusting me. But you gotta admit, you’re not safe there. There’s no way in hell you’re safe there.”

“We’ve been dating *three* months, Billy.” She raises three fingers, voice clipped. “That’s not enough for me to live with someone. We’ve talked about this.”

“We could live in different places then,” he says quickly. “I know you feel better since leaving L.A, Trish. You’ve been eating again-“

Her mouth parts, blood burning. A bubbling red river. “Do *not* bring that up. I hate that. I hate that so much. I hate the idea of you watching me eat, acting like you can judge how I’m doing by that. How dare you-

“-you’ve been the happiest I’ve seen you since we’ve met. And the way you lit up when were walking around Haight-Ashbury, it really

seemed like you felt something. I know you felt something.”

Then it returns. That cold front. It’s like they’re back to when they first danced around each other. Where he came on too strong, and she froze to the bone. “Just because you feel something, doesn’t mean I feel anything at all.”

That triggers a terrible silence. “So you’re saying you don’t feel anything for me?” A scoff follows, just as icy.

“What I’m saying is that, whatever you feel, I’m not there yet.” She pauses and then shakes her head, arms folded tight over her chest. “Is this how it’s always going to be with us?”

“Like what?”

“Every time I get comfortable with you, you push me until I’m not. Every time I get to a new level with you, it’s never enough. I told you-I *always* told you- I wanted to take things slow. Take my time. But you *always* have to push things to maximum intensity. You’re unbelievably impatient. You’re burning me the fuck out.”

He stares out at the roiling sea. The cold, clear stars. He bites at his lip, voice turning sullen. “So what do you want to do?”

Patricia pushes off the log to stand in front of him, hands flailing as she rants. “I don’t want to move. I don’t want to do any of this shit. Isn’t anything I do enough? I tried to file a restraining order, I switched apartments, I quit two jobs. I stood up for myself. And now past few weeks, I’ve been trying to not to binge and purge. I tried, didn’t I? Do you think it’s easy to do all of that? It was really hard for me. It’s like none of that matters to anyone. Everyone acts like I’ve been doing nothing to help myself but I fucking tried!” Her fingers burrow into her scalp, pulling at her baby hairs. “Everything I do, there’s always another obstacle. I didn’t think you’d be the one to put up yet another one for me.”

He leans forward, looking her head on. “I *know* you’ve tried, Trish. You’ve done so much and it’s fucking unfair and insane what’s been happening to you. But you gotta look at the facts. You’re not safe in L.A. And that has nothing to do with how much you try or how good

you are. No matter what you do, you're not gonna be safe there. Not until that psychopath is either behind bars or dead. Not until the scene changes. That's the truth, and you know it."

She balks at his blunt words. "I don't think I can do this anymore."

"Trish, don't."

The ice only thickens, until she's seeing right through him. "I think maybe you should go back to L.A in the morning."

His brows pinch together. "What the fuck are you saying?"

"I don't know if I'm ever going to be able to be what you want me to be." She straightens her spine, arms wrapping around her to cradle herself. "I don't think we should see each other anymore. We want different things. We feel different things."

"I don't believe that." He shakes his head, words coming out quiet. "I *really* don't believe that."

She feels so hollow. Empty. "I do." When she says it, she knows it's just to hurt his feelings.

He reaches for her wrist, holds it gently. "I'll keep living in L.A then. I'll quit the band and stay-"

She pulls back again. "Don't put your life on hold for me. Go to San Francisco. I'd hate it if you stayed for me and despised every second there."

"Then we'll do long-distance."

"No." She's locked in now. Nothing he says can shatter the glacier surrounding her. "I can't be with someone I can't touch. Neither can you."

"*Trish.*" He makes a frustrated sound. Tries to make direct eye contact with her but she keeps looking away. "Don't do this. I don't understand why you're doing this."

She stares numbly at the sand. "Why not?"

“Because I refuse to believe that everything we’ve shared was just something only I felt! There’s no fucking way.”

“Not everything you feel is what I feel, believe it or not.” She takes a shaky breath. “I really think you should leave.”

A silent beat follows before he stands up slowly, looking to the sea to collect himself. When his gaze returns it’s imposing enough to make her breath catch. Jaw clenched. Eyes hardened. A matching steel. “All I ever did was care about you. Since that time you called me from the desert all I did was be there for you whenever you needed me. All I did was lift you up. We’ve got something rare, Trish, and you’re too damn stubborn to see it.” He pauses, the muscle in his jaw ticking. “And I’m not trying to keep you down or control you. I’m trying to fucking protect you.”

He waits for her to respond. She doesn’t, numb and floating above them both. The ocean crashes. She keeps her lips shut.

“Alright, sweetheart. If you want me to leave, I’ll leave.” He reaches into his jacket. Slips a cigarette between his teeth. Lights the tip until smoke spirals. “Gotta say, though. I get you now, Trish. You think you’re made of stone, but you’re not. You’ve got a soft heart and I matter to you. We don’t have to label it, but I know I mean something to you. Something more. I *know* what we have.” Smoke catches on the wind. “So I’m going to ask you, before I do this: Do you seriously want me to go?”

If she says no, she’s afraid she’ll lose herself, the last shred of sovereignty she has. “Yes,” she croaks. “I want you to go. Seriously. I don’t need you to tell me how I feel anymore.”

Another aching pause, hurt emanating off him like black ripples.

His pain. It’s so palpable her chest feels like it’s filling up with blood.

He doesn’t leave yet.

“Fine.” Steely eyes find hers, penetrating. “I’ll go. Let me just make a fool out of myself again first.” He takes a step towards her until their auras graze, pulling at his cigarette before words flow out: “Trish, I’m

hopelessly in love with you and that's not gonna change any time soon. I'm gonna die with your name on my lips and that's a fucking fact. Know that." He's calm in his hurt now, tapping cigarette ash before capturing her gaze again. "Another thing. If you're going to stay in L.A, move in with Amy. Better yet, stay with your aunt in Santa Barbara. You can even live with my stoner uncle and I'll leave you the fuck alone in Malibu. But *don't* try to tough shit out by yourself. If that's only thing I've said tonight that reaches you, I'll be happy with that."

She's incapable of speech. Trapped between respect for his honesty and the most stubborn rage she's ever experienced. A fiery stranglehold around her neck. Ice and flames.

His gaze stays on her, waiting. When she still doesn't respond, he finally surrenders. "Okay, I guess we're really doing this. Fuck." He shakes his head. Shrugs before sighing painfully. "If you need me, call me. You know I'll be always be there. Apparently, I'm fucking stupid that way." He turns towards her aunt's house and flicks his cigarette to sand. "Bye, Trish."

She's frozen there for what seems like ages, standing on the brink between land and sea. Wind whips her hair around her. The breeze smells like ash. She doesn't realize she's crying until she tastes salt.

Then she hears the rev of the Camaro, her legs quivering in response.

She had assumed he would sleep on the couch. Leave at dawn. But the rumbling sound retreats into the night, disappearing until only the sound of the raging surf echoes.

And just like that, he's gone.

28. up the beach

Notes for the Chapter:

This one was a struggle to get out, and I still feel uneasy about it, but better done than perfect, as they say.

Patricia doesn't sleep that night. She lies on the floor, unable to return to the bed she and Billy made love in only hours ago. Staring at the ceiling, she listens to the mournful sea, the hiss and pull as it laps in and out. Her body feels like it's made out of marble. Stuck. Her breath is short, barely able to fill her lungs.

Is this what shock feels like? She's not here. The pain hovers outside of herself, and she keeps it there. Won't let it inside. Impenetrable.

When the sun rises, she decides to head back to Los Angeles. She's tempted to just slip out the door without a goodbye, unsure if she's emotionally capable of telling her aunt that her beautiful boyfriend left.

She decides to face the music. If Doris thought she was a bad niece before, that would surely solidify it.

As if on cue, Auntie Doris knocks on her door.

"Come in." Patricia shoves her hairdryer in the open suitcase.

The door creaks open. "Was just wondering what you guys wanted for breakfast-" Her aunt glances around the room. "Where's Billy?"

"He left." Patricia says numbly, focused on organizing her toiletries.

"What do you mean, *he left*?"

Patricia zips her luggage closed before forcing herself to face her aunt. "We got into a fight. I told him to leave. He left."

"A fight about what?" A weathered hand presses into the door frame, grey-blue irises searching hers.

Patricia jerks her head away from the eyes that see too clearly. "Whatever I say, you're just going to try to get me back together with him. I know he was a big hit with you."

"I got the impression he was a big hit with *you*." Her aunt takes a slow step forward, clicks her tongue. "I'm a little confused, honey. You guys were getting along so well."

"He wanted to me to move to San Francisco with him." The truth tumbles out under Auntie's levelling gaze. "It was just way too fast for me."

Her aunt gives her a curious once-over. "You didn't like it there?"

Patricia's nerves fritz at the cautious tone her aunt is taking on. She's not sure what type of reaction she expected but some maternal judgement wouldn't be surprising. "No, I liked it. But I have a job waiting for me back home starting Monday. My best friend is there. It's just...I can't do it."

Doris presses her lips together, arms crossed. "So you're leaving now, I see."

Patricia sets her duffelbag on the floor. "I'm taking the greyhound."

Her aunt's face looks crestfallen. "You don't want to stay a little longer?"

"I think I need to be alone right now."

"Alright, well..." Her aunt cups a rosy, lined cheek, shaking her head. "I feel like this is my fault."

"How?"

"I told him certain things in my reading. Certain things that *may* have encouraged him to take some more...assertive action in his life."

"Action concerning me?"

Doris nods slowly. "I really thought you guys would be good together..."

Ice crystallizes around her. “Whatever. He’s always wanted more than I can give. I wasn’t ready from day one.” She inspects herself in the nearest mirror. Her eyes look all hollowed out. Like she aged five years in a night.

“Do you think you’ll ever be ready?” The question slices the air.

Her gaze locks with Doris’s in the mirror, blue on blue. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Her aunt gives a wary sigh. “Don’t take offence to this, Patty, but....it’s almost like you’d prefer if a guy treated you badly.”

A scoff spews out her mouth. “Not true.”

“With Derek-“

“That was different. *I* was different then.” Then that guilt starts to build. Squirm and roil. If she doesn’t fess up, that festering will make her implode. “Auntie, there’s something I haven’t told you about Derek yet. Or...my whole life these past few months.”

It gushes like a broken dam. The whole story, from start to finish. Derek. MTV. Her relapse. Everything. Doris listens with eyes brimming, slowly approaching until Patricia’s shaking like a scared fawn in her arms.

“You could have stayed here. I would have kept you safe.”

“It’s over now.” Patricia knuckles the tears from her eyes. “I quit MTV. I’m in a new apartment. I’m here with you now, aren’t I? I’m doing fine. It’s fine.”

Doris shakes her head. “No, it’s not. It’s not okay. The cards... I knew there was something wrong. That you were hiding something.” She pulls back from embracing to take Patricia’s face between her palms. “Don’t go back to L.A. Stay with me.”

“Auntie...” Patricia grips her aunt’s wrists. “I know that you’re trying to help. That everyone’s worried. But it’s killing me. I feel like I can’t breathe without people freaking out. It’s so fucking constrictive. I just want to be free. I can’t be free with everyone telling me what to do.”

She shakes her head. “When someone tells me what to do I just want to run. I want to do the exact opposite just to feel...like myself. I can’t help it. I’m sorry. I’m sorry if I’m hurting everyone. Seems like I don’t know how to be myself without doing that.”

Patricia leaves on the greyhound that afternoon, bile creeping up her throat. A tight vice around her core. Her aunt’s home slowly disappears, and as it does, Patricia wonders if she’s fucked up miserably.

By the time she arrives in Los Angeles, she’s convinced herself otherwise.

*

She enters her cold, expensive apartment. Heaving her duffel bag on the kitchen table, she spots her answering machine blinking red. She clicks play and braces herself.

Warm honey rasps in the dark. Goosebumps rise while grief blooms in her chest.

“Trish.” A pained breath. “I’m sorry. I feel like shit. I shouldn’t have left like that even though you told me to leave. I was just so fucking...mad. I felt like you pulled the rug out from underneath me, but I guess I pulled the rug out from under you too.” He pauses. “I love you. And I want to make things better. I can’t imagine the next few days without seeing you, let alone...shit...forever? My mind blanks at that concept, Trish. I can’t accept it. I can’t. Please call me.”

Next.

“Me again. I should have gotten your aunt’s number, just to check that you’ve got a way home. And when you get this, I know you don’t want to talk to me, but...I’m here. You’ve got me. Please call me. It doesn’t have to be to get back together, as much as I want you to come back to me. I just need to know that you’re okay.”

Patricia is tempted, but she knows what would happen if she called. She’d end up back in his arms within the hour.

So she purposefully barricades her heart. Cold turkey. No exceptions.

Difficult, but not impossible. Practice has made shielding herself a honed skill.

Days go by. Messages pile, each one progressively desperate. Each one deleted mid-sentence to minimize the pain of hearing his voice. She eventually unplugs her phone.

Last day of November, he buzzes her apartment building multiple times. She doesn't answer. Watches him retreat to his Camaro from behind her curtains, engine roaring as he speeds into blood-orange twilight.

He knows she's home. Her lights are on. The Firebird sits alone on the side of the street, clear as day. The signs are loud: we are *done*.

The following morning, Patricia moves into Amy's luxury condo in Brentwood. With no way to contact her, Billy disappears into shadow and Patricia's world turns grey.

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Dec 20. 1987

"Are you ready to go?" Amy asks from the next room. "I've been sitting out here for a half hour."

"Be right there." Patricia smooths down flyaways in the mirror to buck the big hair trend. She hurries out and twirls in front of the television. "How do I look?"

Amy claps her hands. "Ooh, are you making a statement?"

Patricia double-checks her leather and lace ensemble. La Perla perfume and skin shimmering lotion. Red lips, the cherry on top. "What kind of statement?"

"You've moved on and you're on the prowl?"

Not really. Her main motive is just getting out of the house. A month of doing nothing but working herself to death, watching Golden Girls and reading Tolkien's entire backlist is starting to drain. "This is basic Strip attire, darlin'. Not much intention behind it besides playing the

part.”

“You’re so brave.” Amy rises to reveal knee-length modesty. Sweet in powder pink as she tugs on a kitten heel. “I don’t own anything....edgy.”

“I’ll lend you my leather jacket.” Patricia crosses to the entrance closet. “You’ll fit right in.”

“I’m a little nervous, Pat. I think last time you took me out to a metal show I was dodging beer cans all night. And didn’t you slap a guy?”

Patricia returns with her prized jacket, slipping it over Amy’s petite shoulders. “Justice well-served for unwanted ass-groping. But hey, I’m rusty too. Haven’t been to a show for awhile.” And for good reason. She’s been doing everything in her power to not run into Billy. The Strip has become a danger zone and Brentwood’s upper-crust streets are now her new haunt.

She wonders if he’s moved by now. It’s risky, attending a show he would love to see.

Part of her is playing out a hundred different scenarios of what would happen if they *did* run into each other tonight. The most over-played ones involve cigarette smoke and seduction. Windows fogging. Manhandled into his Camaro and ravaged for old times sake. Alternate, less fun montages feature her as an unattainable ice woman that wants for nothing. Those get second billing.

She misses him. To an obsessive degree. He fills her dreams every night, her thoughts every day. It’s masochistic, the level of pain she’s willing to endure to prove a point.

Some might call it denial. She calls it perseverance.

The perseverance is waning. Numb depression has taken over. She’s running on fumes and time does not heal all. The only way she’s survived this period of teeth-gritting resistance is by not allowing herself to dwell for one second. Severing a part of her soul and stowing it away.

Amy drives them out to Hollywood to see Carpal Tunnel: a new,

upcoming band on The Strip. It's a gorgeous evening, the surrounding palm trees twinkling Christmas lights. Decorated trees in the shop windows and festive paraphernalia at every turn. As they wait in line for the show, there's even a few metalheads in Santa hats.

Near the entrance, she finds herself scanning for golden waves, strong shoulders under leather.

No. Don't think of him.

Futile. She feels his presence everywhere, all over Sunset Boulevard. An electric gold current, sending subtle shocks through every -

Amy taps her arm. "Are we going to keep standing here or...?"

Patricia blinks to awareness. She's been standing in the center of the doorway, blocking foot traffic.

"Sorry." She gets her hand stamped and enters the venue. "Was just looking at the lights. They're beautiful."

There's truth to that. Stars have been plucked from the skies and strung across the perimeter. Stage-light adds to the effect, a swirling fuchsia. Patricia weaves through the muggy crowd, her arm nearly losing circulation from the tight grip Amy has on her.

Right as the Carpal Tunnel jumps on stage, Amy starts tugging.

"What is it?"

"A guy with a scorpion neck tattoo is staring at me." Amy curls into Patricia's shoulder with a muffled squeal. "He looks like a pirate. What do I do?"

Patricia peers over Amy's head and spots a certified dreamboat. Dark, well-muscled and silver-eyed. "Give him your number immediately." She meets Amy's horrified stare. "Or the finger."

"Could you do it for me?"

"Which one?"

The music starts. Chords ring out, fuzzy and jagged. An automatic smile lights Patricia's lips. Sometimes you only need a few notes to know how good a band is. This one is excellent. She reaches in her bag for her notepad before realizing she doesn't do that anymore. Her shoulders slump.

Amy loosens her grip, head nodding to the rough beat. "I actually like this!"

"Stick with me, kid. This is only the beginning."

"You're not going to get me drunk again, are you?"

Patricia's brows inch up. "I got you drunk? *You* got you drunk. I was just there for the ride."

It's not long before she's almost feeling like her old self again. Almost. There's this gnawing in her gut that won't go away: the unmistakable sensation of being watched.

Sweeping over her surroundings reveals nothing. Yes, there are a couple of interested eyes on her, but nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing like the creepy-crawly sensation that's wriggling up her spine right now.

She shrugs it off, but the glaring red alert keeps blinking in her periphery.

Mid-set, the lead singer of Carpal Tunnel screams into the mic about an after-party in Venice. Patricia has no intentions of going. Unfortunately, Amy has been coerced into going by neck-tat-guy -also known as Jason- after buying her one drink.

"Come on, Pat! We have to go."

"I don't think so," Patricia says sourly, that queasy sensation still curdling in her intestines. "This is way too Motley Crüe. Bands advertising their own after-party? This is always how the madness starts. "

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if we go to this, we're about to enter a circus whorehouse. Are you ready for that?"

Amy squares her shoulders. "It can't be that bad if we both go. And Jason will be there!" She waves to him from across the venue. He blows a cute kiss back and she catches it.

Jason has transformed into boyfriend material in thirty minutes flat. The dude must have some serious game as well as good looks or Amy is very easy to sweet-talk after one gin and tonic.

"If it sucks, we can leave." Amy offers the most pleading puppy-dog eyes. "*Please?*"

Patricia glares before finally submitting. "Alright, we'll go. But don't you dare pull another Vegas on me. I'm not in the mood for hair-holding."

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Amy drives them both out to the address given onstage. As the location draws nearer, recognition spikes. Patricia freezes in the passengers seat.

This place. Why didn't it click in her head the minute the lead singer gave out the address? The weekly bonfire. The cabin at Venice Beach. The same bonfire Billy took her to months ago.

A walnut sized lump forms in her throat.

"Hey. You okay, Pat?" Amy doesn't miss any signals.

Patricia takes in the familiar palm trees leading to their destination, the dark ocean getting closer and closer. "I've been here before."

"With Billy?"

"Yeah. With Billy."

Amy pulls over, her tone serious. "We don't have to go if it's going to be weird. Do you want to turn back?"

Despite every cell in her body urging her to do exactly that, Patricia doesn't want to be a bummer. "No, it's fine. If I'm going to get over him, I'll need to be okay with being at places we've been. Places he could be."

"Okay... as long as you're sure."

She pats Amy's hand. "Let's go, hun. The debauchery awaits." She falters at the eager smile currently beaming back at her. "I'm really tempted to blindfold you to protect your innocent eyes."

Amy turns back onto the road. "How bad could it be?"

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Bad. Very bad.

The beach bonfire is a far cry from the relatively peaceful sing-along she experienced with Billy and Dave in late summer. People are dangerously drunk now and the harder drugs are on full display. Patricia whisks Amy from that scene and takes her to...the cabin where it's even worse?

What was she thinking bringing Amy here? Unfortunately, before she can drag her back to the car, Amy's been seduced into making out with Jason against a dirty wall.

Okay. So Amy does have a thing for bad boys. She did sleep with Billy after all.

Do not think of that.

Billy. Will he ever stop popping up? Bittersweet nostalgia tangs at the back of her throat. A wine-like amber, past seeping into the present. This entire party is tainted with his memory.

On that thought, two brawling metalheads careen past her, and smash into the coffee table a foot away, spilling cocaine onto the gnarled hardwood.

Nevermind. This entire party is tainted with something far more disturbing. As Patricia elbows her way through the dense crowd of

inebriated partiers, that same odd feeling comes up again.

Someone is watching her. She'd swear by it. She's turning into a nervous owl, her head spinning around to find the source to no avail.

She wants it to be Billy, the fine hairs on her arms raising at the thought. Billy, standing in a corner, his feline gaze smoking up the shadows. He'd take her into that spare room they never got a chance to use last time. Show her all the way he's missed her. Like she misses him now.

A nice thought but this is a different, more sinister stare. Harder, meaner. Acid dripping down her spine.

When news arrives that Carpal Tunnel are going to play an acoustic set near the bonfire, the majority of the revellers push past her to exit the sweaty cabin. Only a few are left behind on the couches or floor, those too high or drunk to move mostly. Or those that are occupied in the bathrooms and bedrooms for obvious reasons.

Amy. Where did she go?

Patricia wanders through the trashed living room and down the dark hall. She's never been this far into the cabin before. She realizes how sandy the floor is now, caked and gritty after years of neglect.

This place is absolutely disgusting. The meager attempts at being festive have been destroyed. The knee-high Santa statue in the corner: decapitated, it's cherry-cheeked face smiling at her at the other end of the hall.

Amy's not here. Patricia hopes she's outside with the rest of them, and not screwing Jason in some stranger's bed. It doesn't seem like something Amy would do, but sometimes she surprises. A rebellious side that rears its head every so often.

The dim hallway ends at a door facing the beach, left open and rattling in the cool wind, a large rock keeping it ajar. Patricia leans against the doorframe, observing the partygoers swarming around the fire half a football field away. A sinister Mecca.

It hits her clearly then. She doesn't belong here. She resents this

drug-fuelled frenzy. She resents this entire scene.

Maybe Billy was right. Maybe she was looking for something that's long gone for her now. This city will never be the same after what happened these last few months. An era is over. The scene is dead. The moment has passed and moved on. What spark was left has been overtaken by addiction and selfish indulgence.

The breeze shifts. A cold sensation barrels up her spine. Wrong. Something is very, very wrong. She can't pinpoint what, but her senses are in overdrive. Won't keep quiet.

An icy hand slaps over her mouth. The whole world collapses.

"If you scream, I'll slice you open."

Breath escapes like a freight train through her nose, limbs paralyzed at her sides. Her eyes helplessly scan the distant crowd, beg them to turn and look this way.

"How you doin', doll?" Derek croons. That familiar voice in her ear makes her skin crawl with invisible ants, as does the knife that's now poised against her belly. "Miss me?"

She doesn't make a sound. Can't think. Suffocated by fear, molasses-thick.

"You don't have to answer. I'm sure you thought of me every night." The knife slides an inch below her navel. "Let's catch up. It's been too long," he hums with sickening friendliness. "So, you made yourself a national slut, huh?"

Her mind races, but all she can think of is her dream, her *dreams*. She should seriously start paying attention to her dreams.

"Guess you always were one, except this time instead of just The Strip knowing, you had to go off and make the whole fucking *world* aware. MTV's favourite floozy. Rumor is they fired you. Guess that's what happens when you're a drunk whore."

She's not sure what's more disturbing: Derek being aware of her on-screen drinking problem or him saying they fired her. The injustice of

that lie is infuriating. The truth of her drunken mistake, humiliating.

He sighs against her skin, breath reeking, vinegar-like. "Don't worry, angel. I don't care about your slutty past, your bad decisions. We can start again, can't we?" His cheek rubs against her temple, the scratch of his stubble irritates the thin flesh. "You know I went to nearly every stupid show waiting for you. Saw you too many times but couldn't touch you. That big idiot you kept around ruined everything. I was so out of sorts."

What to do. Fear fades to logic, her mind clearing by the second. If only he'd relax his knife-wielding arm so she could-

"Then that rumour mill churned, churned, churned. Doll-face is single again! I could finally get you alone. Turns out you became a little hermit, didn't you? Couldn't find you anywhere." His voice is relentlessly charming, contrasts his venom. "You used to be so fun, Pat. It makes me sad, actually. From slut to spinster. I'm not sure what's more *pathetic*." The reality of being stabbed here in this doorway crystallizes. She could die tonight.

A taut string snaps inside. She breaks, her wracked sob stifled in his palm.

"Shh shhh. I hate to do this, Pat, my love." The tip of the knife makes delicate circles, her belly quivers. "If you had listened to me, I wouldn't have to scare you like this. Are you scared, dollface?"

She hates how he keeps asking questions when his clammy hand is in an iron grip around her mouth and chin. His damn knife playing at her navel. The stupefied partygoers shriek in the distance. Guitars twang and throaty wails rise and everyone is completely unaware of the assault happening right under their noses.

If she elbowed him hard and ran away, would she survive? Will she die by doing nothing at all? She has to take a risk. Soon.

"Don't think. I can feel you thinking. You're not going to think anymore, okay?" When she doesn't respond, his voice trembles. "Okay? Nod, bitch."

She nods frantically. The knife sinks a fraction.

“Do you see how fucked up you made me? I’m all sick because of you. You said you loved me and threw me away like garbage.” He laughs, his skeleton frame shaking against her. “I followed you so many places. Watching. Waiting. Wanting to kill myself.” The tip of the blade presses deeper, makes her wince. “He’d never love you like I do. He’s gone now, Pat. I knew you guys wouldn’t last. Not when you’re mine. You might not have known it but I was *all* over you. Even when you were with him...” His blade travels up her breast, her throat, settles at her temple. “I was *here*. I was here the whole time, wasn’t I?”

A floorboard creaks somewhere behind them. A sign of company. Derek doesn’t seem to notice, letting his guard down, his knife lifting up to wave around as he rambles. A gateway to escape.

Just as she finally makes the decision to stomp down on Derek’s foot, elbow his ribs and book it towards the bonfire, he’s yanked from her. The knife clatters on the hardwood. She spins around and her heart backflips.

Billy has Derek on the floor, held by the scruff of his jacket. The cokehead’s lip is already busted open, bleeding dark red. Billy drags his flailing body past her, out the backdoor and onto the sand. Mechanical in his rage, he pins Derek to the ground and unleashes months of suppressed violence.

Fists crush. A brutal whirlwind guaranteed to mash Derek’s face to pulp. Fresh blood splatters the earth. Derek manages to get in two or three hooks, but Billy doesn’t flinch. The pure hatred on his face is like nothing she’s seen before, consumed with an intensity so merciless, she can’t stand to witness it. Her fingers feel awkwardly for the doorframe and she sags there. When she dry-heaves, she rips her gaze away and lurches back into the cabin.

She exits out the front door, through the low gate and onto the sidewalk. Sits down on the side of the road, amongst the glittering long line of cars under streetlights, pulse racing, throat dry, skin numb. The night smells like pink jasmine and pot smoke. People’s laughter carry on the zephyr, no idea of the violence being inflicted

in her name. She clutches her arms around herself and stares at the broken glass beside her foot.

Minutes later, the gate squeaks behind her. She squeezes her eyes shut. When they open again, Billy's on his knees in front of her.

"Are you okay?" He pulls her roughly to him for a crushing embrace but no reply emerges from her mouth, too overwhelmed-with his familiar scent, his comforting bodyheat-to respond.

He pulls back and quickly runs a palm over his mouth as he looks her over. His knuckles are bloody. His face unmarred, except for the beginnings of a bruise on his jaw. His fingers capture her chin, turn her face to the right. Sucking a breath through his teeth, his thumb wipes at her cheekbone, pulling back with a touch of crimson. "*Goddamn*it," he hisses. "That fucking scumbag."

"He nicked me." Her voice sounds alien, watery. Like it's coming from miles away. She locks eyes with him and returns back to the luminescent sea, back to some nameless home. Floating. "I thought you'd be...gone."

"Not until January." His hands grip her shoulders, gently squeeze. His touch is sweet fire, sending healing ambrosia to every one of her shot nerve endings. "He shouldn't have found you before I did," he grates. "If I had gotten there first, this wouldn't have happened." For a moment she's not sure if he means tonight, or in general. "Are you okay?"

Patricia nods again. Can't speak because Billy's looking at her with fevered longing, something agonizing in both its want and hesitance. It's more than she can bear. She cups his face in both hands and kisses the notched space between his brows. When she pulls back, he looks winded.

"I miss you," he finally breathes, a ragged plea. His eyes are glistening. His mouth is so close. Their foreheads press. Noses brushing, her lips parting for contact. "So fucking much. I've been so--"

Before he can finish, Amy is rushing towards them, her dark hair

flying behind her. “Pat!” She collides into them both to grapple Patricia into a hug. “Are you okay? Derek! He was all beat up and lying on the ground, screaming your name, calling you a bitch! And then I couldn’t find you and I was so worried. Fuck him!” She gasps in horror. “Oh no, you’re bleeding.”

“A small cut,” Patricia still hasn’t let go of Billy’s face, her fingers curled around his neck, thumbs softly dragging across his jawline. “I didn’t think he’d go that far.” As she says it, she realizes it’s not true. The idiocy of lying to herself for so long is deplorable. She dragged everyone down with her. She made it so much harder than necessary.

“He cut you?!” Amy is sitting beside her now, linking an arm around her waist. “I shouldn’t have begged you to come here, I feel awful!”

“Billy got him.” She feels so small. A baby, unable to say anything in detail. “He hurt him.”

It’s only then that Amy seems to fully notice Billy. They exchange an awkward glance before he finds a napkin in his jacket pocket, holding it against Patricia’s cheek.

“Do you want me to take you home?” Billy doesn’t wait for an answer. “I’ll take you home.” Then he hesitates, as if remembering something important, suddenly looking like a guilty puppy that just tore up the carpet. “But, um, you should probably know, I brought-“

“I’ll take her home,” Amy cuts Billy off. She’s sizing him up, scanning. “She’s living with me now.”

“Really?” Billy gusts out a sigh of relief, a fraction of tension leaving his face.

On that note, an annoyed voice rings in Patricia’s ears.

“Billy? Baby? Is that you over there?”

Patricia turns and looks.

It’s the beautiful brunette. The same one Billy brought out to The Glitz months ago, the same one who made Patricia storm out of the bar with self-loathing.

“Someone said you got in a fight! Is that true?” The girl notices her with matching awareness. Billy tucks the blood-stained napkin in Patricia’s palm and rises.

The absolute horror of this scenario clicks in her head with the force of a brass-knuckled gut punch.

He’s moved on.

He’s moved on with another girl. A stunning girl. A girl he’s had experience with already. He’s going to take her home tonight and fuck her. He’s probably fucked her many times. Made her come just as many.

Was it anything close to what they shared? Do they touch souls as well as as bodies? Does he care for her in the same way? Does he crave her when they’re apart?

It doesn’t matter. It *shouldn’t* matter. He’s free to fuck whomever he wants. She knows this, but seeing it this close up and personal feels far more horrible than anything Derek did tonight.

She calls him baby. Why didn’t *she* ever call him baby?

Nausea gurgles in her stomach. She’s close to painting the pavement with her insides.

Billy seems highly aware of her discomfort. For once, he looks frazzled. Uncollected. He manages to pull himself together enough to look at his new-old girlfriend and say, “Just had to take care of my friend, Sarah. Some asshole had her cornered with a knife.”

Friend. My friend. It stings more than she’d anticipated. But truly, is there any other way for him to put it right now? They’re not together.

They’re not together.

They’re not together and it’s all her fault.

The girl notices Patricia’s bloody napkin and covers her mouth with both hands. “Oh. My. *Gawd*.” Her cadence betrays her Valley origins.

“Does she need stitches? Do we have to take her to the hospital?”

Patricia shakes her head furiously, not wanting to go *anywhere* with them. “No. No stitches necessary.” She glances between Amy and Billy. “Right?”

Billy nods. “You’ll be fine. I uh-” His face still has this haunted, helpless expression. “I’m sorry I didn’t get there sooner, Trish,” he repeats lamely. His fingers flex and unflex as though still itching to touch her, comfort her. Say something better. The terrible awkwardness of this is beyond his capacity.

Patricia knows that if he was still alone with her, she’d be kissed senseless by now. There would be loving, protective kisses all over her face and mouth. He was seconds away from granting them.

She also knows she’d let them happen. Once that first kiss landed she would have soaked them in eagerly. Leaned in and asked for more.

That mile high wall that she’s built around the castle of her heart has now been sieged. Flames lick at the piled stone. The gate has been breached and untamed feelings are storming the barricade.

She’s never wanted to hold anyone so badly in her life.

A silent sob clots her throat. A siren wails in the distance. “I should go.”

Billy takes a step forward. “Let me walk you to your car.” It’s not a request. The brunette’s brows raise behind him.

“But *baby*, I wanna go home.” Sarah’s arms cross. “My feet hurt.”

“Wait in the Camaro.” He doesn’t look at her, still fixed on Patricia. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

“But-“

His head whips in the beauty’s direction, nearly snarling. “She got fucking attacked tonight. She could have been killed. Just wait in the damn car.” Also not a request.

Sarah's bottom lip trembles before she storms across the road. It's only now that Patricia sees the inky-blue of his Camaro there. The car door slams shut and Billy extends a hand, lifting her to her feet.

He wordlessly follows as Amy guides them to her silver Mercedes-Benz a few cars down, tucked under a palm tree.

"Thank you. For everything." Patricia says as she stands outside her door. Amy settles in the driver's seat.

He swallows. "I know it looks bad. Me and her."

"It's fine," Patricia imagines steel enclosing her bones, forging them with strength. She'll get over this. "We're all adults here." A pause. "You shouldn't have snapped at her, though."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm just feeling a little nuts right now." He huffs through his nose. "Patricia..." His fingers graze her arm. The steel collapses. "She's not you. She'll never be you."

Patricia melts. Then freezes. "Have you...? You know..." She's aware this isn't her business anymore, but she asks anyway.

"Yeah." The regret in his voice is palpable. "We fucked. I'm not gonna lie to you, Trish."

Her heart curls up like a wounded animal and dies. "I see."

That small, sad tone from her exasperates him. "It wasn't serious. It wasn't even satisfying. I just needed to feel something besides wanting to jump off a cliff."

"And what do you feel now?"

"Like jumping off a fucking cliff." He sighs. "Look. It was going to end in a week anyways. It started a few days ago and we weren't going to continue it after the move." He lowers his voice, locks eyes. "She isn't you. All I wanted was for her to be you and she wasn't close. I felt like shit during it and I felt like shit after it was over. It was a dumb fling. I fucked up."

"Billy." A pained smile touches Patricia's lips. "It's been a month. You

don't owe me anything." The truth, but it doesn't make this any easier.

"Then don't look at me all hurt like that. All I want to do is kiss you better."

This is too raw, too messy. "I need to... go home and lie down."

He runs a hand through his hair. "Of course you do. Fuck, why am I even talking about this shit right now?" His tone goes gravelly before it cracks. "I was really scared for you tonight. I couldn't breathe, I was so scared. And so fucking angry. I can't remember the last time I was that angry. I didn't even feel those punches. It's all a blur of red." He takes a breath. "I can't imagine what you feel right now and I hate that I probably made you feel worse. I wanna be there for you but I've got this chick in my car waiting for me, and I don't know what to do." He reaches out, takes her hand in his. "Tell me what to do."

She glances at his hand dwarfing hers, then at Sarah in the Camaro, now staring at Billy's back. In one look she knows that there's major unrequited feelings there. "Go home, Billy. Take care of your girl." The last sentence is more sad than bitter.

His gaze goes steely, eyes glittering. His grip on her hand tightens. "Call me tonight."

Patricia frowns as Sarah makes eye contact with her. She pulls her fingers away. "I dunno, man. This is getting really weird now."

"I know." His shoulders sink in wary acknowledgement. "I know. Just...if you need someone to talk to, don't hesitate."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Good." He backs away a step, though an invisible cord keeps them tethered. "Trish?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you moved in with Amy. Thanks for doing that."

She knows it barely matters after tonight, but maybe her acquiescing to his worries expressed something he needed to know: that she was listening to him.

Patricia nods, slowly opening the car door. “Thanks for saving my life.” The energy between them crackles hot and desperate. He’s holding back from kissing her again and she can’t stand it anymore. “Bye, Billy.”

She gets in the car and watches him walk away.

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks for reading! We are nearing the end now, and I'm feeling a little melancholy about it, but all things must pass.

please share your thoughts below. they mean a lot to me! :)

29. judgement of the moon and stars

Notes for the Chapter:

We're almost there, guys! Hang on!

For the first time since her breakup, Patricia fully lets go. Curled up in bed, tears bleed rivers as weeks of buried emotion erupts. She clings to her mattress like a life raft, trying to tread water in heartbreak's black ocean.

A knock patters at the door. Amy's voice attempts to pop her bubble of despair. "Need some company?"

"I'm fine," comes Patricia's muffled reply, her face smushed into a tear-stained pillow.

"Pat, I haven't seen you in *days*. Have you been eating?"

Patricia turns her face to the side for air. "No..."

"Can I at least bring you something to eat?"

A pause. "Okay."

Amy enters a minute later with a polka-dotted tray. "I made Christmas cookies."

"Okay," Patricia repeats blandly.

"Speaking of Christmas," Amy pushes the mountain of Kleenex off of Patricia's bedside table into the nearest garbage bin. Sets the tray down there. "Are you going back to your aunt's place for the Holidays? "

"No." Patricia reaches for more tissues, blowing loudly, grateful that Amy hasn't prodded her about Billy yet. "Me and my aunt...we're not exactly on good terms right now."

Amy gives her a sympathetic look. "Do you want to come to my place? Stay with my family?"

"It depends." Patricia's eyes are foggy as she sits to an upright position, wincing at the movement. Non-stop tears have given her a pounding headache. She sinks her face into her palms. "Are you going skiing in the Swiss alps or something?"

"No," Amy laughs. "Just because daddy's loaded doesn't mean we're *that* excessive. Just a good old fashioned Californian Christmas." She nudges Patricia. "Do you want to come or not?"

Patricia squints at Amy's hopeful expression. "I guess I could make an appearance. Never was the holiday type, though."

"You're such an Eeyore," Amy smiles. "I'd *love* if you came." She offers her a star-shaped treat. "Cookie?"

Patricia frowns, then accepts. Biting into her first meal of the day, decadence hits her tongue. "It's yummy," she sniffles. Feeling like she doesn't deserve this kindness has her face streaking rivers again. "Thank you..."

"Milk?" Amy shoves the glass in her face.

Patricia nods, slurping back two percent dairy like it's the elixir of life, gulping the entire thing down. "Thanks." She sets the empty glass on her bedside table with a hiccup.

"Do...you want to talk now?"

She knew she wasn't safe. "We *are* talking."

Amy sits down on the bed next to her, a gentle dip of weight. "About Billy, I mean."

Even just hearing his name has Patricia reaching for more tissues. "I don't know," she says through a wet snuffle.

"Pat..." Amy raises her brows at her.

"Fine," she huffs. "It's gonna happen eventually anyway." She twists to plop her head on Amy's lap. "I feel like shit."

Amy strokes Patricia's hair. "I know, sweetie."

A long bout of silence ensues before Patricia says, "I'm glad Derek got beaten up, though. I didn't expect that."

"Really?"

"I mean, I couldn't *look*, but I wasn't expecting to be... so relieved."

"He hurt you," Amy murmurs. "He could have killed you. Of course you felt that way." She pauses. "Any word from the cops yet?"

"Nope." Patricia chews on her cookie. Crumbs scatter on Amy's lap.

"Gosh, what the heck is wrong with the LAPD?"

"If he were anyone but Derek, this would be a different story. I was worried that Billy would end up being the one getting arrested somehow. So I didn't mention his name, being a *friend* and all." She didn't intend for bitterness to weigh so heavy on that word, especially considering that she's the reason for becoming one in the first place.

Amy gives a small smile, keeps her fingers light as she strokes Patricia's hair. "You know, even though he called you that, from everything I heard through the car window, it's very obvious that he wants more than friendship." Her fingers stop. "Have you called him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm struggling to get over the whole *sleeping with another girl* thing." She sighs. "I shouldn't care, though. We were broken up, after all."

"It's okay to not be okay, Pat. You're always so hard on yourself. It's like if you have human emotions, you think you're doing it wrong."

"I do have emotions," Patricia mutters. "A hell of a lot. The only issue is that get me into more trouble than they're worth."

"Doesn't mean you should repress them. Sometimes they can be a guiding light. Show you where you're supposed to go. If you keep

shoving them under the surface, you're never going to know if you're heading in the right direction or not. Feelings are like lighthouses." She nods sagely. "They lead you back to shore."

"You've definitely been reading self-help books again."

"Turns out they help if you actually apply them. Without them, I wouldn't have the courage to go travelling alone."

Patricia shifts her head in Amy's lap. "When's your big trip again?"

"January. My first solo adventure." Amy smiles. "Australia, whoever thought I'd go there?"

"I'm proud of you. Doing what scares you. Trying new things. You seem so much happier and you were already chipper as hell." Patricia stops, fretting. "I'm not happy, Amy. I think I messed everything up."

"You don't think you can forgive him? He obviously still wants to be with you, Pat. He was just coping."

"Couldn't he have coped by getting another hobby or something? Jogging. Stamp collecting. Learning German. Anything else."

Amy laughs. "He's only human, you know." Her hand stills on Patricia's forehead. "You do want him back, don't you?"

"Yeah," Patricia murmurs. "He says he fucked up but I think I fucked up even harder."

"Having someone save your life can change your mind really fast, I'm guessing."

She remembers the look on Billy's face after he found her sitting on the sidewalk. His lips ghosting hers. The blissful relief of being near him again. "I miss him, Amy. I hate that night had to happen for me to see that, but I want him back."

"Are you going to move to San Francisco then?" Amy offers her a knowing glance.

Patricia stretches across the bed for her jacket, the one she wore

when she visited Luna Records a month ago. She pulls out the number that Clemmy gave her and holds it to soft lamp-light. “Yes. I think I even might have another job available when I get there.” She looks up, frowning. “But it already hurts, the idea of living far away from you.”

“Pat, I’m already going to be far away. I’m going to Australia! This is a year long trip. You need to go and live your life. Give into your desires. Face your fears.”

“Face my fears.” Patricia blows out a strained breath. “You know, I had a realization last night. I thought I had commitment issues. But what I really have are abandonment issues. I wanted to hurt Billy before he could hurt me. I didn’t realize it, but I get it now.”

“Wow.” Amy’s brow raises. “Are you sure you didn’t read any of my self-help books?”

“I might have stolen one.” Patricia smirks, then opens her bedside table to pull out *Women Who Love Too Much*. “Turns out there’s a whole section on pushing away the right guy.”

*

The night before Christmas Eve, Patricia calls Billy. It goes straight to voicemail.

She tries again on Christmas Eve, curled up on the couch, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* playing familiar nostalgic carols in the background.

Voicemail again. Then again. She hangs up with a frustrated grumble, hating herself for putting Billy through this exact torture a month ago. He’s probably with his fling or at some family get-together.

Her jaw clenches at the latter thought. Knowing Billy’s past makes the idea of him struggling through Christmas dinner alone depressing as hell.

What would have happened if they hadn’t broken up? Would she be there for him, helping him through the drama? A month ago, she had been prepared to stay by his side through any awkward family bullshit. She’d stand up to that prick of a father for him. Defend him

to the end.

Who's there to defend him now?

Christmas arrives. She spends the day with Amy's family. A perfect Californian Christmas hosted by Amy's purebred parents. Despite her discomfort with being too poor to be there, she's welcomed like family. Amy's father even teaches her how to count cards. If her heart wasn't in her throat thinking about Billy all day, she might have even enjoyed herself.

Days pass. More calls go unanswered. More depression ensues, the worst regret of her life clawing her to shreds.

On New Years Eve, as Amy packs for her flight to Australia, Patricia has a breakthrough: She can't take it anymore. She's going to fight for him. For love. She's going to hunt Billy down and get him back.

It's all come to this. She's cornered herself into making a grand gesture. He deserves it. She's pushed him away so much she needs to pull him back with all the force she has.

Patricia drives out to his apartment, fully prepared to rip Billy off of Sarah or whatever girl he's with and beg. Or find The Hargroves address and cross states to crash their family gathering.

She hustles up the dimly lit path and rings his buzzer. No answer. The hum of anticipation builds, the streets vibrating with a building fervour as 1988 waits around the corner. She rings the buzzer again to no avail, another taste of her own bitter medicine.

To her shock, she picks up the nearest pebble and throws it at his window before she can stop herself. Apparently she's completely lost it, ready to make a scene.

"Billy!" Buzzing adrenaline powers through her body, her hands trembling. "Billy! Are you there?"

No answer.

Just as she's about to throw another rock, the sliding door for the nearest ground floor apartment squeaks open. The old lady who likes

to coerce young men into watching cheesy soap operas with her shuffles out. Her creamy coif of white hair shines as she strains to peek above her wall of red roses. "He's not here, honey!"

"He's not?" Patricia pauses mid-throw, sheepish as Mrs. Hobbes scrutinizes her act of desperation. "Is he with his family?"

The old woman's voice creaks out. "I believe he said he was going to the *New Years Party of the Century*."

Patricia stills. "Party of the Century?" She's definitely no longer in the loop of what's cool on The Strip. "Did he say where it was?"

"Somewhere near Hermosa, I believe. Big new house."

"It's not on the beach, is it?" She tenses up at the horrible memory of her last house party.

"Not sure where it is, just that it's supposed to be bustling!"

"Did he bring a girl with him? A brunette?" Her pulse beats in her ears.

Mrs. Hobbes pauses. "Her? Oh, she's long gone. Stormed out of here before Christmas and hasn't come back." She narrows her eyes. "Are you the same blonde that broke my Billy's heart?"

Patricia takes a heaving breath. "Yes..." Relief battles with a painful stab of guilt. "I'm, um, planning to get him back tonight. Hence...the rock-throwing."

"Goodness! Well, don't throw rocks, dear, of all things. I'd expect better from you."

Patricia's head lowers as she drops the stone. "Sorry, Mrs. Hobbes."

"Oh, I'm sure you're just possessed by passion, like Bo and Hope in *Days of Our Lives*!" Mrs. Hobbes's tone goes dreamy as she suddenly claps her hands. "I hope you mean it, about getting him back. I couldn't stand to see him so downtrodden, always glowering, looking like a troll under a bridge. Not even a hot cup of earl grey could cheer him up!" She clicks her tongue before trilling, "Well, you better

get your behind in gear, dear. He's moving to San Francisco on New Years Day, you know. Run, I say! Run like the wind!"

"I'm going!" Patricia grins at the old woman's theatrics before backing towards her car. "Thank you!"

A small hand points over the roses. "You both owe me tea and soaps before you shoot off into the sunset together. Don't forget!"

Patricia gives her an eager wave. "I won't!" She crosses the street, gets in her Firebird and books it in the direction of Hermosa Beach.

Twenty minutes later, she scans her surroundings like a hawk, the stars guiding her. The moon waxing full. She has no address, no inkling of where this party is besides the general neighbourhood. She drives up and down the streets, looking for the loudest, most insane party she can find.

She turns a dark corner, and *hears* it. Metallica. *Master of Puppets* blaring at ear-bleeding levels. Her eyebrows raise at the source.

It's a huge place, just like Mrs. Hobbes said. Three floors. Brand new, modern, enveloped by the tangy scent of orange trees. If it weren't for the squealing guitars hurtling towards her, she'd assume it was a party for rich yacht-owners. Unlike Barry's mansion, it doesn't emanate eerie doom. It's simply energetic, loud and one hundred percent rock and roll.

There's no parking. The streets are packed to the brim. She pulls over two blocks away and walks her sturdy boots towards the beautiful, ballistic sound of thrash metal. Cackling leather-clad drunks stumble past her as she approaches the open doorway.

It's that familiar cacophony all around. Wild and reckless. She scans the crowd for the sight of that particular blonde head of hair. He's nowhere to be seen. She begins the hunt. Scours the rooms, including the crowded kitchen and the bathroom where ridiculous sin is peaking: the tub full of spaghetti and girls in bikinis, squealing as someone snaps pictures. She cringes and returns to the living room where people writhe, flail, and chug back hard liquor straight from the bottle. Thirty minutes later and she still can't find him.

Did she even come to the right party? This *has* to be it.

A band starts playing in the corner of the giant, trendy living room, the lead singer spewing out cathartic wails of release. His long black hair sleek against leather as he head-bangs. She watches the entire set before approaching slowly, the urge to do something completely stupid overcoming her.

The singer says it's time for an intermission. The band leaves the stage empty, amps buzzing.

She steels herself and hops onto the stage. Taking the mic, tapping it. "Hello?"

A wave of heads turn to look at her, and the reality of what she's doing takes hold. She decides she doesn't care. She's fully invested in being the crazy girl chasing after her ex boyfriend.

"Hey, it's that MTV Chick!" some dude screams. There's a round of drunken applause. "Take it off, babyyyy!", comes another yelp.

She gives the crowd her best pissed scowl, and the hubbub dies. "I'm looking for somebody. Billy Hargrove, are you here tonight?"

He doesn't answer.

"I'll be Billy for you, baby!" comes that same screech. A metalhead so drunk that two people are preventing him from falling over.

"Shut *up*, Zane!" A girl in zebra-print fumes before looking back at the stage.

Patricia scans the audience, a reverent plea in her voice that she didn't intend. "Billy, if you're here. I just wanted to say, I'm sorry. I was wrong. I was so fucking wrong." Her voice breaks. "I miss you. I need you. I...I want you back."

The room goes dead silent, hanging on her every word. She's sweating, nearly shivering with anxiety, but she continues, her voice strengthening.

"You changed me. I know that we talked about how much you

became a better person, but I know I did too. You showed me what it was like to really love someone. To really care.” Her words crackle in the mic. “I love you, Billy. I care. More than you know. *Please* take me back.”

There are a few feminine screams of approval before everyone breaks into another round of applause.

There’s still no reply.

The organ in Patricia’s chest pounds against her ribcage. “Are you here, Billy? Am I even in the right place? I hope to god you’re here.”

Nothing. The silence rings profoundly empty. The crowd breaks out in a disappointed *aww*.

Her shoulders sink with failure, eyes watering. “Thanks, everybody. Happy New Year.” She sets the mic back on the stand and takes the walk of shame away from the crowd.

She finds a dark corner beside a large green monstera plant to hide in. The partiers have already forgotten her, back to their drug-infused revelry. With the last shred of hope she has, she decides to check out the upstairs one more time. If that fails, she’s going back to Amy’s apartment and celebrating New Years alone with a bottle of wine.

Before she ascends the staircase, she spots a person who’s been loitering there since she took the mic. A shady looking man with sunglasses and a ragged brown beard. “Hey, have you seen a blonde guy go up these steps yet? Long hair. Blue eyes. Pretty. You’d notice if he walked past you.” At least she would.

The man lowers his Ray-Bans to reveal a glass eye. “I think so? Some blonde and another guy went up the stairs about an hour ago.”

Her small hope bursts into a bright beacon. “What did the other guy look like?”

“I dunno.” The bearded man scratches the lined skin by his dead orb. “Wavy brown hair, I guess?”

She breaks into a smile. “That sounds like Dave.” She grabs the

banister and starts a quick hike up the stairs. "Thank you!"

"Don't mention it, toots."

Patricia hurries up the steps and down the well-lit hallway, opening room after room. She walks in on more than one couple banging, half who don't seem to notice her.

She finally arrives at the last door on the right. Wide open. The only room left. She saunters through the doorway, giddy. "Found you."

Her heart stops. Two men lie on the floor beside the bed, one blonde, one brunette. Both sprawled out a foot apart, their eyes glossed over. A used needle between them.

Her throat closes in on itself. "Derek?"

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for those still trucking with me. Your words mean a lot to me, so feel free to comment below!

30. fireworks

Notes for the Chapter:

Yup, two chapters in one day. Wooooo

April 28. 1971

“Ma?”

Patricia finds her mother under bathtub water, pale and cold and peaceful. A part of her doesn't want to wake her from this serene moment. She's beautiful. She's not angry.

She's not moving either.

“Ma!” Patricia sinks her little hand beneath the murky liquid, attempts to pull her out.

Too heavy. Ma keeps slipping back into the tub. On the third try, Patricia's scrawny limbs manage to pull her out barely half way. Ma's head smacks against the porcelain, her throat exposed as she lolls backwards.

Ma doesn't gasp for breath. Her body is cold. The water is cold. The needle lies glinting at the side of the tub. Her arm still has the tourniquet around the frail muscle.

Not breathing. Not breathing.

“Help!”

Patricia shakes Ma's shoulders. Ma almost slips back into the bathwater again.

“Help!” The scream rips from her throat. The realization that this could be the last time she ever holds Ma slams into her solar plexus. “Aaron! Aaron-”

Her mother's boyfriend comes whipping into the bathroom, dirty blonde hair stringy and unwashed. He sees Ma hanging limply over

the side of the tub and freezes for a moment before rushing towards them.

“Selene!” He hauls Ma onto the grimy tile with little effort. He tests the pulse at her throat. “Shit. Shit. Shit-“

“Call 911!” Patricia watches as Aaron flattens both his palms over Ma’s chest and starts pumping. He stops to pinch her nose, breathe into her mouth before going back to short hard bursts of rib-cracking pressure. “Aaron, don’t!”

He continues his sharp movements. So brutally hard that Patricia wants to push him away.

“You’re hurting her!”

Aaron doesn’t look up, completely absorbed as he pumps Ma’s chest. “Come on, Selene. Come on. Don’t you fucking die on me, babe. Breathe.”

Water ejects from Ma’s mouth. A coughing fit follows. Patricia rushes to her side, a thousand tons lifting from her shoulders.

“Ma! Are you okay?” Patricia reaches for a gasping Ma to hug her. “I thought you died!”

Ma spews up more water before wheezing, “Get the hell off me.” She rolls over onto her side, hacking uncontrollably, giving Aaron the same response when he tries to touch her a moment later.

In the next few minutes, Ma is sitting upright on the tile. Aaron gathers Patricia close as Ma recovers with a towel around her.

“You didn’t call 911, did you?” Ma shakily lifts herself off the floor, nearly slipping before Aaron grabs her wrist. “I have to hide. I have to hide the stash. We have to leave.”

“We didn’t dial,” Aaron promises.

Ma exhales a sigh of relief, sliding down the peeling wallpaper to sit on the floor. “Not going to jail again.” She absently licks her lips as her eyes flutter closed. “I’d rather die.”

Dec. 31. 1987

Patricia stares for too long of a moment before she collapses to her knees next to Derek's sprawled form, shaking his shoulder roughly. "Wake up."

He's not breathing, his face a pasty blue-white. She feels for his pulse. Not beating. She glances at the needle again, her stomach turning. "You idiot. You fucking idiot."

Nick. In a swift motion, she hurls herself a foot over to the prostrate blonde, fingers flying to his throat. A pulse beats, slow and frail. His shallow breath warms her wrist. Before allowing herself to think, she leans over him, picks up the phone on the nightstand and dials 911.

After mechanically stating her case and the party's address, she hangs up and crawls over to Derek's body again, his eyes half-open and glazed. She's tempted to just close his eyelids and leave the room.

The paramedics might not make it in time. She recalls the training from the summer camp Auntie Doris sent her to as a preteen.

Her palms find Derek's bony chest and begin to pump. She gives breath to him, deserved or not. Chokes through a sob, keeping count. Closing his nostrils, breathing into his stale mouth, pushing against his chapped lips. "Is this what you wanted? You wanted me to help you?" Pump. Pump. Pump. Breathe. "Well, you win, Derek." She slams down with all her force. "Fuck you."

His ribs crack. He doesn't wake. She continues the cycle, broken bones be damned. The opening riff to Motley Crue's "Home Sweet Home" bellows in her ears as she exhales in his mouth again.

When her wrists hurt and she's bit her lip so hard she tastes blood, the EMT's arrive. Billy fills up the doorway minutes later, pushing through paramedics to get to her. He's saying her name but she can barely hear it above her own heartbeat.

Fireworks explode. The final chorus blasts. 1988 arrives and Derek is declared dead on the scene.

After the prognosis is made, Patricia is drilled with questions she can barely answer due to shock. The EMT's carry both Nick and Derek out the room, one in a bodybag. Billy is still being blocked from her by men in uniform, but he elbows through. Her legs are weak as he approaches her. Everything she wanted to say to him is stuck in her throat. Her eyes feel raw, her head full of cotton and sticky webs.

In a few strides, Billy has crossed the room and hauled her into his fierce embrace. Neither of them have words. She curls into him and breaks into a wracking sob, fresh and painful.

Everything about him fills her up. The musky smell of his cologne, his body heat, the perfect fit of their bodies meeting, the rise and fall of his chest. Nothing has ever felt this comforting. She feels reborn here in his arms. Doesn't ever want to let go of him again.

The consequences of letting him go in the first place kick her square in the chest.

"I'm sorry," she weeps, sinking her fingers into his leather jacket. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Don't you fucking dare be sorry." His chin tucks over the top of her head. She stains his white shirt with tears. "It's over, Trish. It's over. He's gone."

Numb, dazed, she lets him guide her out of the party, his arm in a protective hold around her shoulders as they push through the pandemonium. He drives her back to his apartment. A silent ride. She never asked him to take her there but it's the only option she wanted anyway.

Inside, they're surrounded by packed boxes. Only his bed and lamp left. He takes off her shoes, her dress. Nurse-like in his attentiveness, he pulls one of his soft, clean shirts over her head and arms. Completely comfortable, an automatic flow between them that needs no dialogue. Like they're right back where they left off.

He tucks her into bed, turns off the main lights so only his bedside

lamp glows on the floor. He slips under the covers and simply holds her. "Do you need anything?"

She shakes her head. Lets his warmth seep. He doesn't ask for more, doesn't prod, just allows her to be in this difficult rebirth, this new and harsh-as-hell beginning.

"Billy?" Her voice comes out in a scratchy whisper, grates against the half-light.

"Yeah, baby?" He kisses her shoulder.

"Where were you this week? I kept calling you but...you weren't there." She swallows, feels like she's gulping down a tack.

"Went to go see my mom for Christmas. Came back in time to go the party."

"I thought you were ignoring me." She knows how loaded that is, the hypocrisy more than evident.

He doesn't point any of her worries out. "I always pick up unless I'm genuinely not there. I'm sorry I couldn't answer." He goes silent. "You didn't leave a message."

"I know."

There's a long pause. He's waiting for her to say something. She's waiting to have enough courage to relay her feelings, her whole romantic speech squashed by the tragedy of tonight.

"I can't stop thinking about the body." The words spiral out in one breath. It's the truth. The image of Derek sprawled out keeps replaying over and over. "His body. Just lying on the floor."

"Trish..." Her name is an empathetic murmur as he envelops her in the furnace of his limbs. Burning comfort. His lips graze the small scar Derek left behind.

"When I saw him tonight, he...reminded me of my mother. When I found her overdosed in the bathtub. She lived, but-" Her voice rings out hollow. "Is it wrong that when I found both of them, my first

thought was *look how peaceful they are?*”

“No.” He shakes his head against her neck. “No, it’s not.”

“I didn’t want her to wake up. I just never saw her so peaceful like that before.” An inhale shudders. “And Derek, I’ve never seen him shoot up. I had no idea.”

“Nick.” A complete story with one syllable.

“The paramedics said he was going to be alright. He could handle that high of a dose, built up a tolerance. Derek couldn’t handle it.” That splayed skeleton flashes behind her eyes. Derek in her dreams, half-dead on the beach, stabbed through. *Can’t feel a damn thing.*

Her face scrunches up as she breaks down again, her face smearing his bare chest. “Shit...I’m sorry. I just feel so fucked up. I’m not going to be able to sleep.”

Billy cradles her face, thumbs her salty tears away. “Don’t ever feel bad about feeling bad, alright? Especially about this. I know I won’t sleep tonight either.”

“I’m still learning that it’s okay to not be okay.” A pause. “It’s just hard to like myself unless I’m...strong. I’m always trying so hard to be okay.”

“I’ll be there no matter how *un*-okay you are.” He takes her hand, brushes his lips against her cold fingers. “No matter how fucked up you feel about yourself. No matter how shitty things get, I’ll be there. That’s a guarantee.”

“I’m sorry I let things get so shitty to begin with.” Her bottom lip quivers. “You shouldn’t have had to wait a month to talk to me. I shouldn’t have pushed you away like that.”

“It’s alright, Trish. Most people don’t have to deal with this kind of crazy shit in their whole life. Most people wouldn’t handle it as well as you have,” he murmurs. “And hey, I’m no angel, remember? I’ve got a backlist of bad deeds I’m atoning for. If waiting for you is part of my karma, I’m cool with it.”

She takes in the sea of his gaze, feels the care pouring off him. The rock-like presence. Fully here with her, unbreakable.

“I love you.” There it is. No armour to shield her anymore, no desire to hold back. Broken open. “I love you, Billy.”

The joy in his face is heart-wrenchingly pure. He looks five years younger. “I love you too, Trish.” He squeezes her until breathing is challenging. “God, I fucking love you.” He drags a kiss up her neck, sweeps her mouth into a deep worship.

When the kiss breaks she looks into his eyes where adoration burns. She mirrors it, reflects her heart fizzing like champagne.

But...this night is still too heavy. It stubbornly sticks to her insides. Sours the triumph.

She regrets not saying the words as soon as she felt that pang. She had the chance so many times. “I love you even though it’s the worst time ever to say it.”

He snorts softly, his fingers sliding through her hair. “Seems like we both gotta knack for saying it at the wrong time.”

“I hate that I said it now,” she rasps. “I hate that I held it back.”

“I’ll take it whatever way I can get it.” That deep voice soothes. “Don’t be so damn hard on yourself, Trish. This night’s been rough enough as it is.”

“I was going to say it on the beach, in Malibu.” She exhales slow and long. “When we were under the moonlight and saw the colors on the water. I was going to say it then, but I chickened out.”

He chuckles under his breath, sympathetic. “That would have been pretty perfect.” He pulls back to look at her. “Don’t sweat it, sweetheart. I knew it already, anyways.”

“Is that so?” Her brow arches, a smile peaking at his cocky tone.

“Like I said, I know you, Trish. No one’s ever looked at me the way you do.” His mouth perks at the corner. “Like I matter. Like I belong.

It's like coming home. To my *real* home. The one I never thought I'd have. Once you feel that, you never fucking forget it."

Joyful tears burst. She lightly hits his arm. "You stole what I was going to say."

After more much-needed kissing, Billy scans her carefully. "Now that we're saying things at the wrong time, is it cool to ask if you're coming to San Francisco with me?"

She can practically hear his thoughts: *Please say yes. Please say yes.*

"I'm going," she nods.

"Are you sure?"

"I feel like we could be happy there." She pauses. "But, I still want to live in separate apartments."

He's pulling her close enough to merge souls. "That's fine. I just want you near me. It's been the hardest month of my life being away from you."

"I'm not saying that we won't move in together *ever*, I just have to work my way up to that."

"I get it." He rains kisses down upon her, a mirthful smile glowing clear as starlight. "Fuck, Trish. Do you know how happy I am right now?" He hesitates. "Shit, is that bad? Maybe I shouldn't be happy. Like wait a day or something."

"Don't ever feel bad about feeling good," she grins. "I'm happy too."

"Okay, then." He grins back. "We're happy."

Patricia giggles as he mauls her into the mattress, nearly crushing her under his weight. A blissful pressure.

"I love you." Her kiss presses to his lips, his nose, his forehead. Tender. "I love you and I'm never going to go a day without saying it again."

Notes for the Chapter:

Only one chapter left. My bb's are together, finally!
<3 Will probably post it within the next few days.
Can't believe it's almost over!

Thanks so much guys! It's been hard writing this story sometimes but I'm glad i've been committed enough to finish it. (last chapter is already written, just have to add the finishing touches.)

I appreciate your thoughts!:)

note: also, i recently learned that doing cpr on people means you might break someones ribs/sternum....and this is normal and you just keep going lol. the more you know!

31. sugar magnolia, blossoms blooming

Notes for the Chapter:

Folks, we have arrived <3 Though short, this chapter took longer then expected, because ...life.

July 4, 1990.

The Camaro pulls up in front of the old trailer in the Nevada desert. A hot gust blows. Silver chimes glint and ring in the arid wind.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Billy turns the radio down to a soft hum.

“Yes,” Patricia nods grimly. “I’ve been putting it off for too long.” She licks the taste of salt off her lips, wiping a trickle of sweat from her brow, her flesh scorched enough to melt right off her bones. “This heat’s really starting to get to me.”

“Same. My skin’s sticking to the fucking seat.” Billy shifts in his jean shorts with a grimace, leather squeaking. He reaches over and touches her thigh with a low tone. “If you want me to come with, just say the word, babe.”

Patricia takes in the trailer next to them. A mirage blending into dust. “I think it has to be just me and her.”

“Alright.” He scans her over with a careful eye. A kiss finds her damp temple. “I love you.”

She wraps an arm around his shoulders. Nuzzles his neck. “I love you too.” She exits the vehicle, nerves whirl-pooling, her feet unrooted on the desert floor.

This moment. She’s been thinking about this moment for nearly ten years. She had failed at reunion during her last visit to Vegas. Now it’s finally coming to fruition. No turning back.

Patricia opens the chainlink gate. Burning air jets around her face, her hair billowing. The ramshackle flowerbed juts from under the

window, scarlet begonias now withered up. She knocks at the door with an assurance she doesn't feel, breath and heart doing a frantic dance in her throat.

A man opens the door. Craggy. Sun-browed. Black hair and blue eyes. He must have been handsome once. Some former Brando chewed up and spat out. "And who might you be, honey?" His voice curls towards her with a rustic twang.

"I'm here to see my mother."

Piercing eyes narrow. "Mother?"

"Yes..." She tries to see past him, but he takes up the small doorframe. "Selene Des Barres." Sweat glides cold down her spine. "She's here, right?"

He blinks at her before glancing inside. Patricia gets the strong feeling now that Ma has never once mentioned a daughter to him. Despite the initial disappointment of that, it's not a surprise.

"Hold on a sec."

The door closes on Patricia, leaving her standing on the steps of the trailer, the sun beating down on her back. She looks behind at the Camaro where Billy watches. Shrugs at him.

The door opens again. "You can come on in. She's just sitting down over here."

Dread or anticipation? What is this feeling? She follows the man into the trailer, meets muggy heat. A fan buzzes in the corner, circulating the stifling air. A small television set blares The Home Shopping Channel.

Ma sits at a little kitchen table. Sunlight floods one side of her face, the other concealed in shadow. The years have not been kind to her. Her skin is worn leather. Dull eyes are painted up violet, tinged with the fog of opiates, lips red with sticky gloss. Thin brassy hair has been sprayed so it frames her face like a spider. Smoke coils around her head, a cigarette perched between two yellowed fingers.

It's difficult not to compare this woman to her former self. To the vivacious, blonde beauty she once was.

But she's alive. She's alive and she's looking at Patricia with that pale, unnerving stare.

"Well?"

That's it. That's all her mother has to say to her after all these years.

"Ma. It's me." Patricia's voice comes out smaller than intended, thin and reedy.

"Oh, I know who you are, Pat. I'd recognize those sad, poor-me eyes a mile away. Thought you'd perk up with age, but I guess not." Time hasn't faded Ma's acid tongue. She takes a slow drag, leans back slower to glare. "You put on weight, huh? Used to be a little slip of a thing."

Patricia knew this was coming but the impact is still gut-punching as ever. She flinches despite the mental pep-talk she's been giving herself in the days preceding this reunion. "I just wanted to see you. I haven't seen you in so long."

Ma only stares, untouched. She glances at Patricia's hand. "You married yet?"

Patricia peeks at the ring on her finger. Moonstone reflects rays of light over the kitchen cabinets. "Engaged."

"He better be bringing home the bread for you. I always told you to find a man--"

"A man that buys me nice things?" Patricia finishes. "He's far more than that. He gives me the world everyday."

Ma's lip curls. Never was the sentimental type. "You've changed."

Her shoulders lift. "A lot can happen in a decade."

"Why did you come here? Didn't Doris treat you right? I told her to take care of everything."

“She did. She treated me very, very well.”

Smoke clouds Ma’s face. “Good for her.”

A pause lingers. “Why didn’t you ever call?”

“I don’t like talking on the phone much.”

Patricia shifts her weight to her other leg. She inhales deeply, building the nerve to get years of repressed words off her chest. “I have something say to you.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Ma’s grin is both ugly and beautiful, a jarring flash of the nymph she once was. “Well speak up, girl. We’re all waiting for your big speech.”

“I forgive you for what you did to me.”

Ma scrunches her nose. “You what now?” She calls over to the former Brando who’s been hovering in the corner, watching. “You hear that, Harold? She forgives me! Hah!” Her eyes dig into Patricia again, that anger that was so volatile to her as a child, heating up once more. “Well, la-dee-dah, Patty. Look at you. Dressed like a three-dollar tramp, coming here to stir up trouble when I was doing just fine without you.”

Patricia forces herself to stand strong, chest rising. “I knew you’d say something like that. But I just want you to know, that despite how you treated me, the years of torture you put me through, I forgive you. I’m doing very well despite of you. Maybe even *because* of you. So thank you. I wouldn’t be me without you.”

Ma faces away to look out the window, sucking at her cigarette.

“Now that that’s settled, I have a gift.” Patricia reaches into the canvas tote bag around her shoulder, pulls out a magazine and tosses it on the kitchen table. Little Queen shines, Nevada sunlight bouncing off the glossy pink paper. “I’m publisher and writer for the best damn magazine in California. Here’s a copy. Special Edition.”

Ma spares a glance downwards, squints before staring out the window again. “Looks cheap.”

"You're a riot, Ma." Patricia glances around the shoddy trailer, shaking her head at the double standard. "You haven't changed one bit."

Despite the small moment of justice, Patricia's heart hurts. She decides to end her visit here, the toxicity becoming more than she can bear. "I'm going to go now. I won't be coming back. And when I step out of this trailer, I'll never think of you again. I'm cleansed of you as of now." She backs towards the rickety door. "Take care of yourself, Ma. Goodbye."

She exits the trailer and returns to the Camaro, legs just as unsteady as before. Her chest still aches but a weight has no doubt been lifted. When she sees Billy's face again, that lightness only increases.

"How was it?" he asks as she settles into her seat.

Patricia tilts her head back against the upholstery. Heaving a breath, she folds down the sun visor to shield her vision. "I let her go."

Billy plants his palm on her knee. Warmth spreads up her leg to soothe her raw heart. "Proud of you, Trish."

Patricia nods, takes pause before saying, "She cut me deep of course, but I think I did the right thing. Like some sort of justice was finally served." She buckles her seat belt. "It's over."

Billy gives her knee a squeeze, her jaw a soft kiss. He slips shades on before pulling back out onto the road, his hand still on her leg. They drive in silence. The desert landscape rolls like old sepia film, cacti peaking from the earth like green sculptures. There's a deep peace in this stoic scenery, a healing backdrop to this final farewell. The further they get from Ma's trailer, the more Patricia's resolve about her goodbye solidifies.

A chapter of her life is complete. A new one starts today.

As they approach the state border to leave Nevada, Patricia turns on the radio. "Do you think they play Californian stations out here?"

"Not sure." Billy glances at her, then back to the road. "Give it a shot."

She fiddles with the dial. Static winds in and out of her eardrums until she centers in on a familiar sound. “It’s a pretty choppy signal but this is a classic.” Led Zeppelin’s “Going to California” fuzzes around them, harmonies still apparent despite the lack of clarity. “Weird coincidence.”

When the song ends, the radio announcer cuts in: “Next is an up and coming metal band straight out of San Francisco. They just got signed to the independent label, Black Tar records. With some of the best musicianship this side of the Pacific, here’s Dire Wolf.”

Lightning crackles up Patricia’s arms and back, goosebumps mapping over her skin. Her hand slaps on Billy’s shoulder. “Oh my god! You’re on the radio!”

Billy’s brows rise behind his sunglasses. The opening notes to his new band’s latest single makes the speakers buzz, Dave’s signature guitar grooving rapidly over his feral percussion. He lets out a short chuckle. “Fucking finally.”

“What the hell!” She takes off her seatbelt with a squeal, leaning over to circle her arms around his neck, nearly strangling him. “How are you so cool about this? You’ve been waiting for this day forever!” Kisses pepper down his neck. “Be excited!”

“I am!” Billy laughs between their mouths meeting. “Jesus, Trish, you’re gonna make me drive off the damn road.” He cranes his neck to see around the woman currently showering him with affection. When she sits back in her seat, he breathes, “Last place I expected to hear my own song for the first time was in the middle of the desert. Kinda surreal.”

“I think it’s perfect.” She links her fingers through his. Helter-skelter drums make a cacophony of sound around them. “Today’s a new beginning. Don’t you just feel it?”

*

“I’d like the biggest piece, please.” Dave points as Auntie Doris cuts into her 4th of July cake: a homemade vegan extravaganza of red, white and blue. “The corner with the star.”

"There you go, sweetie." Doris plops a giant slice on a crisp paper plate. "I'm looking forward to you serenading us. Pat keeps going on and on about your voice. Says you sing like a bird!"

Dave winks at Patricia, now astride Billy's lap due to lack of available seats. "Guess I'll try to live up to that."

A circle has gathered in Doris's living room, every hand-carved wooden chair taken by either hippie or metalhead. Patricia has never seen her aunt's house this packed before. Clemmy and Rosco huddle in the corner by the peace lilies with a newspaper, having a heated debate about venue reviews for San Francisco versus Los Angeles. Dave's boyfriend, Adam, has a rapt audience as he discusses various motorcycle adventures across the states.

"I'm so glad you all came," Doris says to the room, handing Billy his piece of vanilla cake. "This is the best party I've had in years!" She looks affectionately at the couple before her. "Thank you so much, guys. Do either of you want a beer?" Billy shakes his head. She glances at Patricia. "Oh right, none for you, hun."

"We'll have to have you over sooner than later." Billy's fork slices through starry icing. "See our new apartment."

"Pat's told me all about it!" Doris smiles. "Two rooms and a view of the ocean. Not bad at all."

Billy nods. "She's probably told you I refuse to live anywhere I can't see water. Took forever to find the right place."

"That's the reason it took you so long to move in together?" Doris unfolds a chair to sit.

"Uh..." Billy smirks at Patricia. "That's a whole other story in itself."

"I only move in with people I'm about to marry," Patricia quips. She steals a bite of Billy's cake after finishing her own.

When everyone has had their share of dessert, a knock raps at the door.

"I'll get that." Patricia sets her plate down and crosses to the foyer.

She opens the door and nearly keels over. "Amy!"

Amy's tanned and...transformed. Less put-together. More wild. A yellow baseball cap is fixed on her dark head of hair, now grown past her shoulders, the sleek bob cut a relic of the past. "I'm running on zero hours sleep and three cups of coffee, so if I collapse in your arms, don't mind me." She giggles before setting down her luggage, surrounding Patricia in a eucalyptus-scented hug.

"I thought you were going to be in Australia for another month!" Patricia pecks Amy's cheek. "I'm so happy to see you!"

"Plans changed," Amy beams. "California was calling me back home."

"I've missed you so much. Letters weren't enough." Patricia holds her closer, then retrieves Amy's bag off the ground. "Come in, come in. Dave's about to break out the guitar. Then you have to tell me all about your trip!"

As Amy makes her rounds of hello's and gets her own piece of cake, Patricia returns to Billy's lap. While she plays with his hair, Clemmy corners her with a newspaper in hand, freshly-dyed purple tresses catching the light. "I think you might want to see this, my friend." She places the paper between Patricia's fingers.

A small section has been circled in red pen, the title in bold: **MTV Exec Fired for Sexual Misconduct, Files Bankruptcy.**

"No flipping way." Patricia grips the paper, letting out a relieved laugh. "Am I dreaming? This day just keeps getting better and better." She shifts so Billy can read the headline too.

"Yes!" Billy fist pumps the air. "Knew the asshole had it coming." He hoists Patricia close to him for a tighter embrace. "No one fucks with Trish and gets away with it."

"Justice is real, apparently." Patricia gawks at the print once more. "It just takes a long-ass time." Billy snorts at that.

They've been so engrossed in this good news, they haven't yet noticed Dave fingerpicking at his guitar. Then his voice flows out rich

and clear, carrying a whimsical melody.

Sugar magnolia, blossoms blooming...

"I love this song!" Auntie Doris claps a hand on her thigh to the beat. Her mug of organic beer raises in approval. "I didn't know you were a Deadhead, Dave!"

She's got everything delightful, she's got everything I need, takes the wheel when I'm seeing double...

As Dave's voice entrances, Doris sneaks over to Billy and Patricia with a whisper. "Did anyone here bring a joint?"

She's got everything delightful, she's got everything I need. A breeze in the pines, in the sun and bright moonlight, lazing in the sunshine, yes indeed...

"We might have made a stop in Malibu before we got here," Billy hums. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out Uncle Ollie's dextrously rolled homegrown, scanning Auntie Doris with a knowing grin. "Gotta say, I have a strong feeling you'd dig the guy that grows this stuff."

Blooming like a red rose, breathing more freely...sunshine, daydream, sunshine, daydream...

When Dave takes a break to sample Auntie Doris's beer, fingers twine. Billy guides Patricia out to the back patio deck where sun sets in luminous rose. They pass by party guests, circle down the stone path to the backyard orange tree, ocean salt mixing with sweet citrus air. Sitting on the bench under fertile branches, they watch water crest the shoreline. A perfect evening for a perfect day.

Billy drapes an arm around her shoulders as she rests her head in the crook of his neck. Light has shrunk to a sliver of gold when he eventually speaks. "Hey, back when you saw your mother..." His palm rounds over her stomach, cupping the slight bump. "Did you tell her?"

Patricia covers his hand with hers, keeps that loving warmth close. Imagines it emanating into her, nurturing new life there: the treasure

they discovered two weeks after his proposal. “No.”

“That’s probably a good thing.”

Patricia agrees. “Only love for this little one.”

Billy nestles Patricia into his chest. Her crown gets blessed with a kiss. “Seems like everything’s falling into place, baby.”

“It is.” Patricia drinks in the paradise horizon, joy filling every atom. “I’m free, Billy.” She looks to the sparkling blue sea, then into his eyes shining the same hue. “I’m finally free.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow.

I did it! I wrote the whole thing! My loves have a happy ending and are makin’ cute af babies in California dreamland! Yay! *gives myself much needed pat on the back and forehead kisses*

It’s been almost a year exactly since I started this fic, and it’s been an insane journey of a lot of highs and many lows. I’ll be honest and say I wanted to quit so! many! times! due to dying feedback/losing readers but I needed to complete it for me. It’s officially my first ever completed longfic/novel and it is dripping with my blood, sweat and tears.

It’s definitely a bittersweet end. I had to push through a lot of uncomfortable emotions to get here. All of this—the world building, the romance, the original characters, the arcs and plot lines, foreshadowing—was far more complex and mature than anything I’ve ever written before. Besides Billy’s character, this was basically an original story and I struggled with so much self doubt about my writing

with every update. There were also quite a few “what is even the point of this” meltdowns but I suppose honing my craft and feeling random sparks of joy or the odd catharsis while typing away made it all worth it in the end. As did giving my baby Trish the ending she deserves! I am going to miss her deeply. She’s my first OC (as a lead character) and definitely became a real person to me. Giving her life was a beautiful-and very intense -process. She’s my heart and soul and I’ll treasure her always.

All in all, I’m just relieved that the story is out there and finished. My work here is done. It was a difficult and educational birthing process and I’m ready to lay it to rest and work on my original fiction. Thanks to those who encouraged and supported me, even as I became more and more distant from the fandom. I re-read your comments so many times to lift my spirits and I don’t know if I could have finished it without you.

I hope this story reaches those that need it the most and that it remains in the hearts of those that it’s touched. Take care and much love to you all! <3